In the “Reading” chapter of Walden (1854), Thoreau heaps contempt on novels and those who read them. Scorning the silliness of fictive love stories, he mocks “the nine thousandth tale about Zebulon and Sephronia,” parodies an advertisement for a novel (“The Skip of the Tip-Toe-Hop, a Romance of the Middle Ages”), and ridicules the absorption of novel-readers: “All this they read with saucer eyes, and erect and primitive curiosity.” The result of novel-reading is physical and mental dissolution: “dulness [sic] of sight, a stagnation of the vital circulations, and a general deliquium and sloughing off of all the intellectual faculties.” Novels are mental junk food, “gingerbread” far less nourishing and more popular than the “pure wheat or rye-and-Indian” of the Iliad in Greek.

Far from idiosyncratic and curmudgeonly, such grumblings were representative of the sentiments of many educated Americans before the Civil War who, in books telling their fellow citizens how to live, exhorted readers to shun novels for more edifying fare. This chapter surveys the evidence of more than twenty conduct books published in the United States between 1828 and 1857 to demonstrate that resistance to the novel remained strong throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, contrary to what one might expect given the emphasis in our literary historical narratives on the novel’s growing popularity and cultural acceptance during this period. What is remarkable about the advice on novel-reading in these books is not the invective brandished against novels—the vivid denunciations of the genre
will be familiar enough to students of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America—but the sheer persistence and pervasiveness of anti-novel condemnation across writers of various backgrounds addressing different audiences. Just as surprisingly, many conduct book authors frowned upon not only “novels” but fiction altogether, while those who directed their attention to novels typically treated them as a class, without discriminating among them according to national origin, literary mode, religious perspective, or didactic intent. One might imagine that the educators and moralists who penned conduct books would regard, say, a cheap reprint of a torrid French romance limning the travails of amorous aristocrats with greater disapproval than an American-authored tale about a New England miss choosing the path of true virtue, but in fact they seldom paused long enough to acknowledge a difference. Instead, they invoked centuries-old anti-fiction rhetoric with a consistency that reveals how deeply rooted anti-novel ideology was in nineteenth-century American culture. With this resistance in mind, we can perceive more clearly the challenge nineteenth-century American novelists faced—how they made their bids for moral authority from within a culture that was only grudgingly beginning to grant fiction respectability.

This chapter is thus intended as something of a reminder, an attempt to resurrect and reinforce the half-forgotten story of nineteenth-century Americans’ distrust of the novel. Terence Martin has shown that between 1800 and 1820, the influence of Scottish Common Sense philosophy on an already moralistic culture led to strong prohibitions against fiction. Accepting the metaphysical assumptions of thinkers like Dugald Stewart, Thomas Reid, and Hugh Blair, Americans distinguished between the worlds of “actuality” and “possibility,” associating the former with knowledge, maturity, and life in the world and the latter with imagination, childhood, and irrelevance. In this schema, fiction, as a product of the imagination, lacked positive value for adults. At worst, it was a threat to morals; at best, if indulged in moderation, a harmless diversion. Building on Martin’s work, Michael Davitt Bell has pointed to the continuing prevalence of Common Sense philosophy in college curricula to make a point that is essentially the one this chapter underscores and elaborates: that for the first half of the nineteenth century, “conventional opinion” condemned fiction as “deeply dangerous, psychologically threatening, and even socially subversive” and that Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville wrote in an environment hostile to the romance, a “climate in which the fictionality of fiction was accentuated and condemned.” Corroborating this observation, Ronald Zboray has explained how a “popular positivism” and concern for “self-culture” in the period steered readers, especially those in
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the working class, away from fiction and toward facts and “useful knowledge”: “Everywhere in America a person who wished to read fiction had to overcome significant institutional, religious, and cultural discouragements to it.” Yet scholars since Bell and Zboray who have called attention to antebellum anti-fiction discourse have tended to cast it as peculiarly Protestant, without acknowledging that it was culturally representative or noting its circulation among non-religious writers as well. Such is the case with David Paul Nord, who describes the anti-novel polemic of the American Tract Society; Candy Gunther Brown, who explains how mid-nineteenth-century evangelicals continued to question whether even religious novels were moral; and Paul Gutjahr, who traces the contentious relationship of Protestants to fiction from the mid-nineteenth century forward to show that many Protestants disapproved of novels until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Considering both religious and secular perspectives, Barbara Hochman has demonstrated in her examination of attitudes toward fiction in the United States between 1870 and 1920 that “[u]ntil well into the twentieth century fiction-reading was an extremely popular but still contested social practice.” She cites to good purpose Roger Chartier’s wry observation that “the novel, like the bourgeoisie, always seems to be rising.”

Despite the scholarship showing that hostility toward novels persisted throughout the nineteenth century, awareness of antebellum anti-novel discourse has been imperfectly integrated into our literary histories, with many continuing to reinforce the idea that the middle of the century witnessed the “The Triumph of the Novel,” per the second chapter of Nina Baym’s influential Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America. Invocation of this rather too-celebratory idea tends to find its justification in three major trends of the antebellum period: the growing acceptance of novels and praise for their virtues in periodical reviews, which Baym details; the novel’s burgeoning popularity; and the rise of religious fiction. Although each indicator provides a useful picture of the novel’s fortunes at mid-century, each also has significant limitations, revealing the necessity of charting the novel’s status through a diversity of measures.

One of the most influential arguments for the novel’s mid-century victory comes from Baym’s “Triumph of the Novel” chapter. Analyzing hundreds of book reviews published between 1840 and 1860 in major periodicals, Baym shows that reviewers increasingly spoke favorably of the novel as a genre during this period and that by 1850, the sophisticated vocabulary available for reviewing novels signaled that “the novel had entered the world of intellectual discourse.” Baym’s study also demonstrates that by mid-century reviewers had stopped criticizing the novel as inherently corrupt and that only
one of the twenty-one magazines surveyed, the Methodist Ladies’ Repository, regularly denigrated the genre as such. Working from a similar archive, James Machor has argued that distrust of novels “gave way in the antebellum era to a public recognition—manifested and conducted most volubly in the periodical press—that Americans were devoting increasing amounts of time to fiction reading.”9 Machor’s framing of the reviewers’ shift in attitude as one from “distrust” to a “recognition” of readers’ habits points, as he discusses, to the reviews’ continuing moralism; though no longer condemning fiction, reviewers still read for a story’s overall moral effect.10 Although Machor may well be correct in his larger point that reviewers were a significant influence on middle-class conventions of reading fiction (though Ronald and Mary Zborays’ work on reader response to fiction has challenged this claim), we should be skeptical of the idea that periodicals were the only important public commentators on the novel, or that “they formed an interpretive community whose assumptions constituted the public forum for the reading and writing of fiction in early-nineteenth-century America” (my emphasis).11 Periodicals may have offered the most specific guidance in how to read fiction, but they were not the only significant public voices commenting on fiction or shaping attitudes toward it. We should not forget that magazine essays represented not a neutral public discourse but the viewpoint of an industry with an economic stake in respecting fiction. Many periodicals used fiction or reviews of fiction to fill their pages, and a few belonged to publishing houses that also brought novels to market.12 As G. Harrison Orians pointed out years ago, the chance to gain readers by running fiction gave reviewers and editors an incentive to proclaim its virtues or at least not denigrate it, resulting in “considerable liberalism in the magazines and news-sheets” when it came to reviewing fiction.13 Also worth remembering are the social and professional networks that created reciprocal relationships among editors and reviewers across the publishing industry. If reviewers formed an “interpretive community” whose work functioned as a “corporate and communal” endorsement of fiction, these shared values were perhaps due less to a general shift in cultural attitudes than to the strength of these industry-specific networks and the desire to procure favor and avoid giving offense within them.14 As Lara Cohen discusses, an endemic “puffing” system, in which favorable reviews could be bought for complimentary copies, favorable reviews in exchange, or outright cash unsettles the idealized notion—first promulgated by the antebellum publishing industry itself—that the period’s literary criticism exemplified a noncommercial, democratic public sphere. Widespread puffery demonstrates “that the proliferation of print did not guarantee the democratization of print culture”; canny opera-
tors, including authors who went so far as to adopt a third-person stance to review their own books, could and did achieve great influence behind the scenes.\textsuperscript{15} In short, for all the value that periodical reviews have in suggesting an evolving public discourse around the novel, they should not be read as a metonym for the culture as a whole.

An equally common measure of the novel’s ascendancy at mid-century is its popularity: novel publication and novel-reading were both surging. John Austin has shown that the number of fiction titles that were either bestsellers or, in Frank Luther Mott’s term, “better sellers,” skyrocketed between 1820 and 1850. He also demonstrates that fiction grew longer in this period, with novel-length works edging out short- and medium-length stories.\textsuperscript{16} That is, the period saw a concurrent rise in fiction’s popularity relative to other genres and in the length of that fiction, with works increasingly looking like those longer, more involved fictions we today call novels, whether they were titled tales, legends, romances, or novels. Further quantitative evidence comes from the charge records of the New York Society Library from the years around 1850; analyzing these records, Ronald Zboray has shown that between 1847 and 1849, novels accounted for only 21 percent of the total books charged, but that for the years between 1854 and 1856, this figure rose to 45 percent.\textsuperscript{17} The Zborays have also documented the explosion during the antebellum period of American fiction, as opposed to European reprints, reporting that the two decades between 1837 and 1857 saw “at least 2,305 new American-authored fiction titles in book form.”\textsuperscript{18}

It is thus undeniable that Americans were reading more fiction in this period, but we should not conflate popularity with cultural authority or assume that because many more people were reading novels that these books also enjoyed cultural respectability or were widely esteemed as having moral value. Evidence from the diaries of antebellum readers suggests that it was not unusual to enjoy novels yet feel ambivalent about doing so, just as someone today might indulge in a television program or video game as a guilty pleasure. Indeed, as Mary Kelley has suggested, the prohibitions against fiction may have increased its allure.\textsuperscript{19} The Zborays relate how one woman writing in 1833 lamented staying up late to read Maria Edgeworth’s \textit{Belinda}: “‘[W]ith exceeding foolishness again read Belinda, a thing that does me no possible good,’” and how a New Haven schoolteacher journaling in 1849 described locking herself in her room to finish Fredrika Bremer’s \textit{The Neighbors}—“‘and long I read, and leaf after leaf I turned [. . . ] till I was almost spellbound’”—only to berate herself the next morning for her binge: “‘I’ll never read again till I learn to control myself.’”\textsuperscript{20} Similarly remorseful was a young woman in North Carolina who, as Kelley reports, wrote in her diary,
“I have again for the first time in three or four years (I believe) been guilty of reading a Novel.” Kelley remarks that the woman’s expressions of regret “read almost as conventions, as acknowledgments made with little or no conviction” and reflect “less the power of proscription than the nearly irresistible appeal of the novel.” But too hastily declaring the novel—and the autonomous female reader—the winner of this conflict distorts the antebellum reading experience by minimizing the internalized censure that coexisted with pleasure. Indeed, the fact that the young woman had not succumbed to novel-reading in three or four years suggests that the novel’s appeal was less irresistible than we might like to think, and the desire to respect cultural prohibitions stronger.

Finally, growing cultural acceptance of fiction in this period is often inferred from the proliferation of religious fiction—Unitarian novels like Catharine Sedgwick’s *A New-England Tale* (1822), Calvinist ones like Sara Ann Evans’s *Resignation* (1825), and evangelical blockbusters like Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854). The publication and popularity of such novels point to changing cultural attitudes but do not translate into a general sanction for reading fiction. Discussing the continued Protestant resistance to fiction at mid-century, Gutjahr notes not only the influence of Common Sense philosophy but also the beliefs that fiction “inflamed the imagination and thus the passions” and that it leached time from Bible-reading and devotional practice. Brown shows that some evangelicals objected to Christian novels because they led to more dangerous fictions and consumed “time, money, and energy that should have been invested in an urgent struggle against the forces of evil.” And Nord adds that antebellum Protestants objected to fiction “precisely because it was false,” which one might read as an internalization of Common Sense philosophy or as the legacy of the Puritan distrust of the imagination, or both. As I discuss below, few conduct books of this period even mentioned the existence of religious novels.

Our drive to create a unified literary historical narrative for the novel should not deafen us to the conflicting discourses that surrounded it at mid-century. If, as Hochman has shown, the novel’s rise was “uneven” at the end of the century, hampered by continuing suspicions about the genre’s value, it was even more so fifty years earlier. In mid-nineteenth-century conduct books we find a much less liberal perspective on novel-reading than the periodical reviews Baym discusses, yet one no less essential for our understanding of the novel’s cultural position. An ancestor of that now-popular genre “self-help,” conduct books were written to provide young men and women with moral and practical guidance on subjects related to assum-
ing the responsibilities of adulthood, such as managing one’s time, living a faithful Christian life, staying healthy, cultivating appropriate friendships, adjusting to the duties of marriage, and choosing one’s reading material wisely. Distinct from etiquette books, conduct books served “an almost anthropological function by codifying society’s idealized expectations in regard to proper behavior in life, as opposed to behavior in society.”

They are a particularly valuable source for understanding the novel’s cultural position in that they provide insight into middle-class values. That the period’s conduct book authors were, as the historian Isabel Lehuu has written, generally “white, middle-class, educated New Englanders, affiliated with various Protestant denominations and often supporters of Whig doctrine,” might seem to limit their representativeness, but these identity markers also indicate the extent to which they wrote from a socially and economically dominant position invested with the power to define cultural respectability.

Of diverse professional identities, these authors were reformers, journalists, educators, physicians, women writers, and clergymen. The ministry was the best represented profession among conduct book authors, but we should not take this fact to mean that their views were narrowly religious and thus marginal to a public discourse assumed to be secular. The ministers hailed from a variety of faiths—not only from Methodism, often associated with a world-renouncing piety, but also from Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, Episcopalianism, and Unitarianism. Though theologically conservative clergy tended to be more critical of novels than liberals, even liberals treated them with skepticism. Further, these ministers’ views can be assumed to have some continuity with those of the public, given the cultural dominance of Protestantism before the Civil War and the fact that religious voluntarism gave ministers a good reason not to stray too far from the cultural biases of their parishioners. Regardless of professional affiliation, conduct book authors were at least as representative of middle-class values as the periodical editors and reviewers whom Machor calls “avatars of the dominant culture” and exemplars of middle-class reading practices. That both of these roles, periodical reviewer and conduct book author, assumed a stance of cultural guardianship reveals a tension within the middle class between conservative and liberal perspectives on novel-reading. The liberal position would eventually win out, but the conservative one was neither vestigial nor marginal.

It is worth observing that conduct book writers had a vested interest in discouraging novel-reading, just as periodical reviewers did in encouraging it. The very act of writing a conduct book might be said to prejudice one against novels insofar as novels were potential rivals in the attempt to shape behavior and values. Though conduct book authors did not condescend to
acknowledge this rivalry, they could hardly help realizing the new cultural role of a great deal of antebellum fiction, which was, as Richard Brodhead has argued, to enact a form of parental guidance—to be “another monitory intimate, another agent of discipline through love.” Clerical authors of conduct books may have felt an even stronger sense of competition with novels, fearing that Americans would turn to moral and uplifting stories rather than to their ministers for spiritual guidance. They may also have perceived the form itself as an agent of secularism, since, as William Warner has written, novels furthered the desanctification of books through their disposability, ephemerality, anonymity, and commodification. This desanctification devalued not only the Bible but also religious literature such as devotional manuals and printed sermons. Ministers may also have resented the novel as a competitor for Americans’ precious Sunday leisure hours. One can read this rivalry at work in Methodist minister Daniel Smith’s alarmist anti-fiction rhetoric in Lectures to Young Men (1852). Warning readers about the spiritual perils of staying at home with a novel on Sunday afternoon, when one was supposed to be at church for the second service, Smith related an anecdote—a dialogue-heavy, suspense-driven one, naturally—in which a young man accompanies his friends to church one Sunday and, though he starts listening with no particular interest in spiritual things, takes a growing interest in the sermon. He feels as never before an “immediate duty to turn to God.” But then, fatally, he remembers the novel he has not finished reading. Looking back on this moment, the young man wails:

What came between me and my God? Am I not giving the history of many, when I say it was the fascinations of a novel? I had been reading one the previous day, and had left it with an earnest desire to know the close. I had indulged myself in novel-reading until it had become a passion—until almost everything else was forgotten for its pleasures. And now, as the sermon closed, the thought of that story rose before me. Shall I read it? was the mental question. I knew that, if on my return home I turned to its pages, every religious impression would be obliterated; and during all the closing prayer, during all my walk home, the struggle was going on—and the novel conquered. The voice of the Spirit was silenced.

Here the desire to resolve narrative suspense is an all-consuming lust at odds with spiritual concerns. Not far beneath the surface lies the conflict between the novel and the minister—one the minister loses when the young man’s urge to keep reading drowns out the altar call.

Another point worth clarifying about antebellum conduct books is that they discouraged young men as well as women from reading novels. To be
sure, cautions about the perils of novel-reading were more often directed toward women, who were presumed to have more leisure time for reading fiction and less inclination for more serious works, such as the oft-recommended biographies, histories, essays, and travels. But young men were not given a pass when it came to pleasure reading. Conduct book authors admonished young men to abjure reading fiction or, at the very least, to keep this addiction-producing tendency in check. Such warnings reflect the fact that both men and women were avid novel readers, as suggested by the subscription lists of such fiction-intensive periodicals as the *Southern Literary Messenger* or by the New York Society Library records, which show that between 1854 and 1856, novels constituted 46 percent of the books men charged and 44 percent of the books women charged.\(^35\) The anti-novel rhetoric that conduct books directed at men reinforced their emphasis on the cultural model of masculinity Sarah Newton has called the Christian Achiever ideal. This ideal encompassed both the Franklinian values necessary for success in the new capitalistic system—self-discipline, ambition, energy, industriousness, and an unceasing sense of purpose—and traditional Christian values like compassion, kindness, and integrity.\(^36\) On occasion, conduct books for men even couched their anti-novel rhetoric in gendered terms. In *The Young Husband* (1840), William Andrus Alcott, a physician, reformer, and one of the leading conduct book writers of the age, exhorted readers, “Let us then—especially those of us who are heads of families, or who are destined to be such—resolve to encourage narrative, biography, travels and voyages, manners and customs, &c., and let alone fiction.”\(^37\) In most antebellum conduct books for men, as for women, the life well lived included little to no time for reading novels.

Below I first outline the conduct books’ most common objections to novels, distinguishing when necessary between those critiques set forth by most conduct book authors and those specific to the Methodists, fiction’s harshest critics. I then analyze a few examples of an emergent pro-novel rhetoric, often guarded and self-contradictory, in which conduct book authors struggled to articulate how the novel might have a unique, genre-specific social value.

**The case against novels**

The most vivid denunciations of novel-reading incorporated metaphors that had been a staple of anti-novel discourse for centuries. Like Thoreau disparaging novels as “gingerbread,” many conduct book authors likened novels
to unhealthy food. Unitarian minister George Burnap warned young men in 1840 that as with all “dainties,” one should indulge in novels only sparingly. They were “sweetmeats,” and anyone who spent day after day reading them would “soon be overtaken with nausea, sickness, and disgust.”

William Greenleaf Eliot, a Unitarian minister and the founder of Washington University in St. Louis, warned young men that novels could no more fortify the mind than “sweetmeats and confectionery” could strengthen the body. Acceptable as “occasional refreshment,” they were “absolutely pernicious” as daily food.

Women received similar dietary counsel. Though one might expect the independent-minded women’s rights activist, abolitionist, and pioneering journalist Jane Grey Swisshelm to adopt a liberal attitude toward women’s reading material, she cautioned young women in *Letters to Country Girls* (1853), a book based on her advice column in her *Pittsburg Saturday Visiter* [*sic*] in the late 1840s and 1850s, that “[r]eading for amusement hours at a stretch, is like eating for half the day together.” A reader’s mind was not to be a stomach but a factory, “where the raw material is taken in and improved in value.”

Thomas Clark, Episcopal Bishop of Rhode Island, told young men and women in 1855 that they should not “glut” their immortal minds with “works of fiction,” since doing so stimulated a desire for increasingly sensational stories. The habitual reader for amusement became “a gouty epicure, and the dish must be highly seasoned to stimulate his palate.”

The more one read, the more lurid the stories one craved. Conduct book authors who compared reading to harmful and uncontrollable eating reinforced the idea that readers were “passive and somnolent, indeed [ . . . ] virtually mindless,” as Janice Radway has written with respect to twentieth-century critics’ use of metaphors of consumption to denigrate mass culture.

The overall effect of such rhetoric was not to advocate a balanced diet of reading that included fiction, but to argue for the superiority of abstinence, since it was ultimately the “food” that was in control, not the eater.

Comparisons of novels to food often sat alongside more sensational language equating them with alcohol and condemning them with temperance rhetoric. John Todd, a Congregationalist minister and outspoken abolitionist, wrote in *The Daughter at School* (1854) that his reply to a young lady who asked how many novels she could read would be that of the physician whose patient asked how much brandy he could drink: “‘a little won’t hurt you much, but none at all won’t hurt you any.’” Where “novels and romances” were concerned, his readers’ mantra should be “touch not, taste not, handle not.”

Similarly, Swisshelm sought to lessen fiction’s appeal for young women by telling them that to spend half the day reading a novel was “like eating opium, or drinking brandy; for it is practiced just for excitement, and to kill
time.” Even Sedgwick, one of the nation’s most popular and respected novelists, could write in Means and Ends; Or, Self-Training (1839) that reading “poor novels” was like trying to live on “bar-room cordials, water-gruel, and rehashed hashes.” Further, she warned that the “captivation” of all fiction “should put you on your guard, my young friends, and teach you that temperance, if not abstinence, is your duty.”

For a few critics, most of whom belonged to theologically conservative religious traditions, comparisons of fiction to sweetmeats, brandy, and opium did not go far enough. These writers summoned the language of poisoning, pica, necrophagia, and pollution to warn the young away from fiction’s corrupting influence. Some used this rhetoric incidentally, as when Clark, bemoaning the popularity of “works of mere amusement,” fretted that young people were increasingly “fed with nothing but this innutritious and perhaps poisonous aliment.” Others were more pointed. Southerner Virginia Cary, for instance, offered a gruesome variation on the theme of novel-reading as gluttony when she compared those who consumed “the garbage of the circulating libraries” to corpse-devouring monsters: “A mind that can take pleasure in the trash of silly novels, which may be raked from the charnel houses of literature, deserves to be compared to the female monster in the Arabian tales, who fed upon dead bodies.” A reader should resist the desire for such food as one would resist “the depraved desire to eat chalk and other unnatural food, which betokens a diseased state of the animal system.” Such stomach-churning images were continuous with a cultural rhetoric that associated reading novels with mental and spiritual pollution. Todd warned that just as standing outside on a lovely but damp moonlit night could kill you, so the human heart contained fibers that were “destroyed by the subtle poison drawn from novels and romances.” More explicit yet was Sarah Barnes’s rhetoric in A Book for the Eldest Daughter (1849). Besides deploring novel-reading as “a most ruinous, time-wasting, heart-defiling practice,” Barnes wrote of novels, “If they shine, it is only as the rotting log, or putrescent carcase, which is phosphorescent because decaying; if brilliant, it is only as the will-o’-the-wisp, which is caused by impure and fetid gases.” Comparing reading novels to inhaling graveyard gases may seem over-the-top, but it mirrors many other conduct book denigrations of reading as defilement—as the equivalent of handling “pitch,” listening to “filthy conversation,” inflicting “stains” on one’s character, or wading in an “overflowing ditch.”

With a tenacious life of their own, the derogatory metaphors wielded to disparage novels often circulated unaccompanied by argument or justification, as if the harmfulness of novels were a self-evident truth. Those authors who bothered to elaborate on the reasons for avoiding novels tended to focus
on the mentally deleterious effects of imaginative writing. Margaret Coxe, principal of a female seminary in Cincinnati and author of *The Young Lady’s Companion* (1839), warned young ladies that when the “habit of reading works of fiction is once fixed, the whole mental system becomes enervated; the reflective powers are permitted to remain dormant, while the imagination is unnaturally stimulated”; nothing was a “greater foe to religious or mental excellence.” Writing in 1853, Mrs. L. G. Abell, author of numerous nineteenth-century advice books for women, sounded a similar note: “*Novel reading* is another undue stimulus to the brain, and is often a fruitful source of evil to the mind. It weakens the mental faculties if habitually practiced, and wastes those energies of the soul in idle sympathies, that were given us for active use and benevolent effort.” The idea that fiction vitiated the intellect appears even in the conduct books of temperance author and literary entrepreneur Timothy Shay Arthur, the second most prolific American author of fiction in book form between 1837 and 1857, with 106 volumes of fiction to his name. Any young lady who indulged a great deal in novel-reading, Arthur wrote, lacked “strength of intellect” and would never become “a woman of true intelligence.” He gave young men much the same advice: if novel-readers “do not actually stand still, [they] make but little advance in intellectual improvement.”

As part of the worry that novels turned young people’s brains to jelly, cultural guardians maintained that reading novels would sap young people’s desire and ability to read more instructive works. In volumes addressed to both sexes, Clark held that reading novels made more serious studies seem “dry and disagreeable”; Presbyterian minister Matthew Hale Smith, that knowing “the contents of the last novel, will not improve your minds, or impart to them vigor”; and Todd, that none could “rise up from such reading and go with pleasure to the sober duties of life, or to reading and thoughts that are rational.” Some conduct book authors were vexed at the thought of young adults spending their time reading novels as opposed to nonfiction. Affirming that “truth is always better than fiction,” Daniel Smith asked, “Why ever spend our time in reading a poor, not to say a bad book, when we may, at the same time, be reading one of the highest order?” Alcott put the argument that novels diverted readers from “better books” more pragmatically: “For—to use language which every New Englander will understand—who wishes to be always collecting cents and dimes, when he might just as well gather dollars?” Novels were an investment unworthy of a young man’s time.

One twist on the argument that fiction distracted young people from better reading came from Horace Mann, the pioneering education reformer,
U.S. Representative from Massachusetts from 1848 to 1852, and, through his marriage to Mary Peabody, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s brother-in-law. In a lecture delivered to young men in Boston in 1849 and printed the next year, Mann eschewed the typical tactic of urging his listeners to reject novels for “rational” fare and instead tried to enhance the appeal of science by claiming that it offered the same emotional rewards as fiction: “One thing is certain. If men can love fiction, they can love science better. Men love fiction because they love wonder and excitement; but nothing is more true than that truth is more wonderful than fiction. No invention of the imagination is so exciting as the revelations of science.” Science would so supplant fiction in rousing men’s wonder, he declared, that future ages would look back on those whose imaginations were satisfied with the Arabian Nights or stories of fairyland with the pity one felt for “the savage whose highest idea of regal adornment can be satisfied with beads of glass and jewelry of tin.”61 The metaphor resonated with the Common Sense philosophers’ belief that a love of poetry and art characterized “primitive” societies and anticipated Thoreau’s derision of novel-readers’ “primitive curiosity.”62

Despite the prevalence of the idea that fiction enervated the mind, the seeming corollary that it inflamed the passions seems to have been rarer. Methodist minister Daniel Wise was one of the few to invoke this hoary notion, a variation of Plato’s claim in Book X of The Republic that good poetry stirred up irrepressible passions. Addressing young men, Wise described the perils of fiction with the vividness of a seasoned storyteller. Fiction turned the soul into a “smouldering fire” so that when the “guilty opportunity” arrived, “The spark ignites. The soul is in a blaze of passion. The sin is committed. The deed is done: and guilt binds its fearful burden upon the conscience, with chains of triple steel.” He pointed to Dante’s depiction of the adulterers Paolo and Francesca, who met their mutual ruin by reading together of the love-struck Lancelot. Such scenes, he held, were representative of novel-reading, and those who balked at the idea that a novel could have ill effects were infatuated with this type of reading: “you love it—passionately love it!” The charge resonates with Cathy Davidson’s observation that early American advice literature imagined that the “engrossed reading of the wrong text [was] itself a kind of seduction.”63 For evidence of the novel’s threat, Wise appealed to the experience of novel readers everywhere, who knew that such books “corrupt the heart, through the imagination.”64

If such claims that novels led the young astray sexually were scarce by the mid-nineteenth century, a more common argument was that novels—and indeed, all fiction—created dissatisfaction with the actual world. Moralists condemned fiction for distorting social and moral realities, or promoting
“false views of life,” and for creating overly excitable young people, mainly women, in the process. Arthur wrote that the typical female novel reader ended up disappointed with her life because, failing to find herself surrounded by the same “ideal perfections” she had read about, she received perpetual shocks to her “over-refined sensibilities.” Sarah Gould’s *A Golden Legacy to Daughters* (1857) echoed the notion that fiction was full of airy illusions leading to overwrought nerves; Gould complained that many works on the market “with romantic titles and fascinating stories” were “full of visionary speculations and sentimentalism, which create nothing more or less than a morbid sensibility.” Similarly, Arthur Freeling’s *Young Bride’s Book* (1849) criticized fiction for inspiring a “contempt for ordinary realities” that led the young wife to neglect her husband, children, and domestic responsibilities as she pursued her unholy passion for reading fiction. Setting his sights on perverted public taste, Clark stressed that fiction could not sell unless every thing be made as *intense* as possible; every character, good or bad, must be exaggerated into an angel or a devil; every pathetic scene must be heartrending; every escape from peril, miraculous; every storm, a hurricane; every sunrise, the harbinger of something transcending human experience; and every nightfall, draws the curtain of darkness around transactions, harrowing beyond description.

However seemingly quaint, objections to the period’s fiction as lacking verisimilitude prefigured the critiques of postbellum writers who reacted to sentimentalism and sensationalism by writing fiction in a new, self-consciously realist mode.

One of the most serious charges leveled against fiction was that it interfered with the Christian life. Coxe warned her readers that if they were susceptible to fiction’s charms and found themselves caught up in “vain dreams of an ideal happiness” that led them to neglect their duties, then, if they wished to follow the Savior, they were “not to indulge in the reading of works of fiction, even sparingly: *total abstinence* from them is essential to restore moral and mental health.” But even readers without this weakness were to avoid the injurious example of fiction that emphasized material concerns and rewards. Coxe quoted at length the counsel of Mary Martha Sherwood, the prolific British Evangelical writer for children and young people, who had warned young women against all books that represented “happiness as proceeding from outward circumstances, or depending upon certain external relations of life, such as husbands, wives, children, possessions, honours, beauty, &c.” Such blanket censure covered virtually any story with a
conventional happy ending. Readers were reminded that they should prefer God's blessing to any worldly reward and that meditation and devotion were far preferable to the spiritual deceptions of fiction. Pitting fiction against piety in *Letters to a Sister* (1850), Alcott held women accountable for the souls they damned while frittering away their time reading novels or other worthless books. He charged that young women who read “Byron or Bulwer” were wasting “that time God had given them for the sole purpose of enabling them to snatch a younger brother, sister or dependent, from eternal woe!” For a young woman to indulge in such frivolous reading was equivalent to “murdering” time and, worse, to “practically murdering one or more of those immortal spirits for whom time was made.”

Alcott’s hyperbole illuminates the daunting demands at the heart of antebellum ideologies of middle-class womanhood, in which women were morally obliged to dedicate those few minutes not already spent meeting others’ physical and emotional needs to guarding family members’ spiritual well-being. From this perspective, a woman’s choice to read fiction constituted a real threat to the immortal destinies of all those who depended on her religious influence and prayerful solicitation for their souls.

In one of the most polemical attacks setting novels against religion, the Methodist minister Wise argued that reading novels prevented one from answering the Holy Spirit’s call to conversion. His anti-fiction diatribe climaxed in the story of two young women forced to choose between novels and Christ:

As, in a certain revival, two persons were awakened who were inveterate novel readers. Their favorite books stood in the way of their conversion. They were willing to be Christians, if their idol could remain undestroyed. This, of course, was impossible, and they saw it. One of them yielded, gave up her novels, and became a joyful convert. The other determined to cleave to her favorite books, whether she obtained religion or not, and was soon freed from serious feelings. She preferred novels to Christ, and Christ forsook her! Nor is she alone. Thousands have made the same choice, and have experienced a similar fate. Reader, will you abandon novels? By all your desire for intellectual and moral improvement, I beg you to forsake them at once, wholly, and forever.

As in Smith’s story about the young man who *almost* accepted Christ but who lost his spiritual focus when he returned to his novel on a Sunday afternoon, the love of novels stands between the half-awakened sinner and full conversion. For Wise the main problem was the unsavory characters novels intro-
duced—the “thieves and profligates” whose company sullied the mind: “Can your soul be a bright mirror in which none but pure images are reflected, after such reading?” Like nearly all antebellum conduct book authors, Wise made no mention of novels designed to promote morality and religion, setting forth instead the logic of mutual exclusivity in which one representative soul “preferred novels to Christ, and Christ forsook her!”

Less dogmatically, several conduct book writers conceded that some novels were better than others but maintained that reading the acceptable ones led so quickly to reading the unacceptable ones that it was best to avoid them all. In *The Young Man’s Guide* (1833), an exceptionally popular book that ran through twenty-one editions between 1833 and 1858, Alcott wrote that “if fiction is allowable at all, it is only under the guidance of age and experience”—that is, the counsel of a mentor. Those men who had little leisure for reading did best “to abandon novels wholly,” for “If they begin to read them, it is difficult to tell to what an excess they may go; if they never read one in their whole lives, they will sustain no great loss.” Or as Smith described fiction’s addictive power: “if we once fairly enter the field of fiction, we shall not stop with the select few, but be enticed on to peruse the heterogeneous and pernicious many; and considering truth is always better than fiction, why enter this dangerous path at all?”

Describing a similarly slippery slope, Wise in *The Young Man’s Counsellor* (1851) held that reading a novel did not necessarily damn you (no talk here of Christ forsaking the novel-reader), but it could kill you as you careened from bad novels to worse:

> Yet in one point they do harm; they create a taste for fictitious reading. This taste soon acquires the intensity of a passion. The mind acquires a craving for excitement, and thus the youth, who begins by reveling among the splendid paintings of Sir Walter Scott’s pen, or by subjecting himself to the quiet enchantment of Fredrika Bremer’s spirit, will speedily seek the works of more impassioned authors. He will hasten from Dickens to James, from James to Bulwer, from Bulwer to Ainsworth, from him to Eugene Sue, and finally he will steep his polluted mind in the abominations of that Moloch among novelists, Paul de Kock. By this time he is ready for destruction. By venturing into the pleasing ripple, he has been tempted to sport in the heaving breakers, until, caught by the resistless under current, he is borne out to sea, and meets a premature death. How much better to have avoided the ripple! Young man, beware of reading your first novel!”

Wise painted the reader’s ultimate corruption as inevitable; eventually one would be rolling in the mud of Charles Paul de Kock, a Parisian novelist
known for his humorous depictions of the lower and middle classes. To start reading fiction was to venture down a path that ended in spiritual degradation and death. Although Wise represents an extreme view, he shared with many conduct book authors the assumption that, faced with the bewildering proliferation of novels and the questionable morality of many of them, the safest strategy was to discourage young adults from looking into them altogether.

An emergent tolerance

A few antebellum conduct books offer a glimpse of more liberal attitudes to come. In some, the pat rhetoric of condemnation coexisted alongside a tentative rhetoric of accommodation. Such authors could be strangely divided in their perspective, both vehemently rehearsing traditional critiques of novels and conceding that novels could in certain cases be a healthy recreation or even morally worthwhile. Cary, for instance, both reviled the reading of novels from circulating libraries as monstrous necrophagia and granted that the age had produced moral fiction “eminently calculated to exalt the moral sense and develop the social virtues”—apparently none of which the circulating libraries carried. Playing it safe, she maintained that instructional fiction was most appropriate for children and that mature minds would progress to more substantive works. Clark, too, muddied the waters, first castigating novels as mentally debilitating, morally polluting, and altogether too intense, then hastening to say that he did not, of course, proscribe all fiction. In fact, some popular fiction could do a great deal of good, cultivating “the noblest affections of the heart,” teaching “the grandest lessons” of the age, pressing the claims of the poor, and advocating for “every great cause, political, philanthropic, moral, and religious.” Indeed these causes “could not gain the public attention so effectually in any other garb.” Writing in 1855, Clark implicitly endorsed any number of sentimental and reformist English and American authors who used fiction to advocate for a “great cause”: Harriet Beecher Stowe, of course, but also theoretically Lippard, Dickens, Gaskell, and T. S. Arthur. A similar mid-discourse about-face appears in Arthur’s own conduct book. After first admonishing young ladies not to overindulge in novel-reading, calling it a “very serious evil” and connecting it to a weakened mind and overdeveloped imagination, he pivoted abruptly to praising Sedgwick, Maria Edgeworth, and other moral writers and to asserting that reading moral fiction is “necessary to a well-balanced mind.” He defended fiction as having a discrete role in the literary division of labor, one that
complemented the respective benefits of history, philosophy, and poetry. Namely, it taught sympathy for others, with “well-wrought fiction [. . . ] giving to man a love for his fellow-man, and inspiring him with a wish to do good.” Only fiction, he continued, presented humanity from the inside, showing us that this fellow man “is fashioned in all things as we are; that he has like hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, and like aspirations after the good and the true.”

Careening down what looks a good deal like the slippery slope other moralists feared, Arthur grew more and more inclusive as he sought to articulate fiction’s value—defending first the moral fiction of Sedgwick and company, then any “well-wrought fiction,” then simply fiction. What he ended up saying was that fiction’s distinctive, detailed representations of character subjectivity had a unique ability to teach readers how to sympathize with others. Since sympathy had been considered the foundation of morality from Adam Smith forward, Arthur effectively claimed that fiction made readers more moral regardless of whether or not it aimed to instruct. He did not, though, reconcile this line of reasoning with his warnings just paragraphs before about the dangers of overindulging in fiction. He did not conclude, for instance, that while fiction offered many moral benefits, it posed a threat if not read in moderation. His comments were not so well digested as that, making for a real discrepancy between his denouncing too much fiction-reading as a “very serious evil” and his defense of fiction’s intrinsic moral value. The ragged seams of this discourse suggest that Americans at mid-century were engaged in an incomplete dialectical process in which the established arguments against fiction sat uneasily next to newer arguments in its favor.

A few writers did use counsels of moderation to resolve the tension between fiction’s ritually decried perils and the new reality of abundant moral fiction. One grudging concession came from Eliot, who, like Cary, presented fiction-reading as an acquired taste of childhood, blaming “the inordinate love of novel-reading which marks this generation” on the “multiplication of juvenile books of fiction, of which our Sunday schools and day schools are full” and grumbling that no one could teach a moral anymore without “clothing it in a fictitious tale of love and danger.” He granted that while not all novels were harmful, their only proper use was to give “rest or recreation to the mind”; they were no substitute for more serious reading. Coxe went so far as to offer a precise prescription for the type and amount of fiction one could read. Provided one were not the sort to become overly excited by fiction and had a healthy mind, morally sound novels might be enjoyed sparingly, “on an average, one or two in the course of a twelve-month.” Such abstemiousness presumably reduced the risk that one would
become addicted or move so quickly from one author to another that one
degraded one’s moral sensibilities.

Even when conduct books conceded that not all fiction was dangerous,
they tended to gloss over how to discern the good from the bad. Those who
addressed this issue typically shifted responsibility to other moral arbiters.
Clark, for instance, admonished readers to be guided by “the general ver-
dict of the wise and good” in winnowing the wheat from the chaff. More
pointedly, Burnap told readers to manage the tide of new literature by read-
ing reviews, an intriguing solution given that reviews, judging from Baym’s
research, almost all evinced a more liberal perspective on fiction-reading
than Burnap himself. Others recommended seeking more personal guid-
ance. Barnes, for instance, who reluctantly acknowledged that she did “not
pretend to say that there are not works of fiction which may be read with
profit,” told her readers that they could determine what those exceptions
were by letting "your older and wiser and more experienced friends judge for
you.” Representing a more liberal mindset, Sedgwick left the choice up to
the young themselves: “In the wide department of fictitious writing, let your
consciences restrain and direct your inclination, and rectify your taste.”

Of course, this counsel to self-discipline raised its own problems, since one
might not feel pangs of conscience until well into an offending volume, at
which point one was both morally compromised and, if conscience were
heeded, compelled to forfeit the satisfaction of finishing the story. And if
the practical alternative to a parlor strewn with half-read novels was to seek
direction from reviews, mentors, and rumor, then appeals to conscientious
restraint were hardly liberating.

Conduct book authors seldom pronounced judgment on specific writ-
ers, but the grand exception was Sir Walter Scott, a perpetual touchstone
in discussions of fiction’s social and moral value. For many, Scott stood in a
category by himself, exempt from the usual proscriptions. Cary, for instance,
confessed that she had read Scott with “great pleasure by way of recreation”
and held that his work was far preferable to other pastimes of youth: “surely
one of Scott’s best romances, or a sublime piece of poetry, would fill up a
leisure hour more profitably than chess, or cards, or riddles, not to mention
the senseless games in vogue among the young and thoughtless.” Similarly,
Burnap, who compared novels to dainties and counseled not wasting money
on “novels and other ephemeral frivolities,” praised Scott and Edgeworth as
an antidote to bodily exhaustion and mental depression just as effective as
the natural tonic of green fields and blooming flowers. Scott, he wrote, was
“one of the great benefactors of the human race,” who mingled “the highest
intellectual and moral instruction with the most exquisite pleasure.”
Not everyone was so keen on Scott. Todd, who discouraged all fiction-reading, declared that Scott was no exception and cited British abolitionist William Wilberforce’s opinion of the Waverley novels: “I am always sorry that they should have so little moral or religious object. They remind me of a giant spending his strength in cracking nuts.” Alcott, too, maintained that Scott’s fiction was far less valuable than didactic works: “The careful study of a single chapter of Watts’s Improvement of the Mind is of more real practical value than the perusal of all that the best and most voluminous novel writers, Walter Scott not excepted, have ever written.” Even Sedgwick discouraged readers from letting a love of Scott keep them from more serious reading. She cautioned that though the novels of Scott and Edgeworth were indeed better than the usual “trash” of the circulating libraries, one should not waste time rereading Scott. Readers who found themselves picking up Ivanhoe to peruse it a second time, while neglecting books that might teach them something new, should wait to indulge this questionable pleasure until they were “indisposed and listless, or [. . .] condemned to a steamboat.”

It is striking how rarely conduct books praised novelists besides Scott or any American novelists at all. In a rare moment of recognition for the “American Scott,” Alcott wrote that James Fenimore Cooper’s fiction, as well as Washington Irving’s, was not as harmless as some believed. Just because one person could read these authors without suffering negative effects did not mean that others would escape unscathed. For one who had read these novels to contend that they had done no harm was to rationalize a bad habit, or as Alcott put it, drawing on temperance rhetoric, “As well might the dram-drinker—now seventy years of age—contend that spirit-drinking is salutary.” In short, it was irresponsible to countenance seemingly inoffensive novels such as Cooper’s when so many led to “moral turpitude.” As for other American novelists, Sedgwick got a nod from T. S. Arthur, but only for her more tract-like works: The Poor Rich Man and the Rich Poor Man, Live and Let Live, and Home. The other authors named as appropriate reading for young people were all British and Continental women—Edgeworth, Mary Brunton, Amelia Opie, Grace Kennedy, Sophie Cottin, Fredrika Bremer—and even these received only occasional mention. Dickens was disparaged despite his popularity, as in the above-quoted counsels of Matthew Hale Smith and Daniel Wise that set him alongside romancer Edward Bulwer-Lytton. The disinclination to grant moral or cultural value to the most famous novelist writing in English in the mid-nineteenth century reveals the profound disjunction between the moral discourse surrounding novel-reading and Americans’ actual reading practices.
After the Civil War, advice literature began to adopt a more tolerant stance toward imaginative writing, though as Hochman has shown, fiction was still regularly censured. One example of growing liberalism can be found in Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The American Woman’s Home* (1869), which addressed novel-reading in the course of discussing proper “domestic amusements.” Although one might expect this volume to advocate for fiction given Stowe’s obvious investment in its moral value, it instead evidences a discourse in transition, one that held that whatever benefits fiction might confer, it also harbored significant threats. After explaining that “confusion and difference of opinion on the subject” had arisen because of the difficulty of differentiating various classes of fiction, the Beechers defended fictitious narrative as “necessary and useful,” pointing to the parables and allegories of Scripture as “divine examples.” Still, the question of “what kind of fabulous writing must be avoided and what allowed” was not easily answered. Far from endorsing fiction across the board, they recycled the moralistic anti-fiction rhetoric popular before the war: “No works of fiction which tend to throw the allurements of taste and genius around vice and crime should ever be tolerated; and all that tend to give false views of life and duty should also be banished.” As for those works written for “mere amusement, presenting scenes and events that are interesting and exciting and have no bad moral influence,” the decision about whether or not to read them depended on an individual’s temperament: “phlegmatic” natures might benefit from the stimulus, while those who already had “quick and active imaginations” might be injured. Fiction was thus still imagined as a physical substance acting on a passive consumer, but now whether it was healthy or unhealthy, medicinal or poisonous, depended on the individual, not the text itself. Yet readers were not left to make their own determinations as to a novel’s possible moral effects; they were to seek counsel from “editors, clergymen, and teachers,” who were responsible for reading widely so they could “warn others of danger.” Gatekeepers were to undertake this risky mission using the same precautions as those physicians who—here the metaphor of pollution resurfaced—“visit infected districts” while striving to limit their exposure to disease.92

What we learn from nineteenth-century conduct books is that 1850 was no magic turning point in American letters, when the novel, like a prodigal son come home, at long last received paternal blessings and a place at the table. Attaining cultural respectability was a much more gradual process, and those adults who saw themselves as responsible for guiding and instructing young people erred on the side of caution. They resisted endorsing a genre that had long been considered morally and intellectually inferior, one asso-
associated in the popular imagination with candy, confections, and sweetmeats, or, worse, alcohol, poison, pollution, and death. The pervasiveness of anti-novel ideology suggests that it was not identifiable with a specific religious or professional position, but part of the fabric of middle-class values. Those cultural guardians who distinguished between better fictions and worse did so gingerly, wary of granting the young too much license or of speaking too well of a genre whose seemingly intrinsic pleasures might detract from more useful reading or weaken the intellect. To the extent that we take antebellum conduct books not as the marginal, self-serving discourse of an out-of-touch religious minority but as the expression of mores and values still widely respected, though seldom blindly followed, their disdain for fiction and warnings against novels as a class suggest that antebellum Americans continued to be skeptical about the value of fiction. The conduct books’ codification of this skepticism illuminates why Thoreau sneered at novels in his own guide to living and why so many antebellum authors were ambivalent about writing fiction—why, for instance, Hawthorne mocked himself as only a “writer of story-books” and Susan Warner included the counsel “Read no novels” at the end of *The Wide, Wide World.* To author a novel was still a dubious enterprise, which meant that those who did so had to stare down a host of influential naysayers. One of the chief ways novelists held their ground was to claim the sermon as their own. The proper metaphor for a novel, as they would have it, was neither filth nor food nor phantasm but a sublimity-infused, morally relevant sermon. No author claimed this idea more fervently than George Lippard.