Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel

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CHAPTER 3

The Radical Protestant Preaching of George Lippard

GEORGE LIPPARD was one of the most widely read authors in antebellum America, a prolific writer and impassioned labor advocate who penned an impressive array of novels, short stories, patriotic legends, and essays between 1841 and his death in 1854 at age thirty-two. *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall; A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime* (1845) may have been “the best-selling American novel before *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,*” and in the late 1840s, when other novelists had difficulty paying their bills, his writing brought in between $3000 and $4000 annually.¹ Yet he has always skulked on the fringes of the canon, a quirky bit player in the drama of American literature whose subversive sensationalism makes him a welcome counterpoint to the canonical genteel writers of the 1840s. What this two-dimensional portrait leaves out are the religious and moral dimensions of his fiction that came to the fore as he matured.²

Literary history has tended to treat Lippard’s moralism and religiosity as a virtual fig leaf for his scandalous content. There is a persistent assumption that, as Daniel Couégnas writes of Gothic novels in general, “the commercial laws that gratify the ‘inadmissible’ dreams of the reader must still pay the wages of morality and censorship in order to survive.”³ In this vein, Leslie Fiedler could call the moralizing that follows Arlington’s killing of Mary’s seducer in *The Quaker City* “false and forced, Lippard’s amends for having lingered so lasciviously over the details of the rape,” and even David Reynolds, who has done more than anyone to give Lippard a place among the
period’s writers and to bring to light his religious commitments, has included him with those “dark reformers [who] were inventing moral disguises for notably immoral, sometimes even sacrilegious ponderings.”

Against this view of morality as disguise, I read Lippard’s religious and moral ideals as an animating force behind his fiction. While his religious values evolved over the course of the 1840s, as he transitioned from the Methodism of his childhood to a more idiosyncratic and radical Protestantism, they consistently included anti-sectarianism and compassion for the poor. By the late 1840s, he was advocating a theologically liberal faith that emphasized the “brotherhood” of all people and the dignity of labor and that found inspiration in the theologically innovative idea that Jesus was a “class-conscious worker,” born among the poor and for the poor. This faith called for improving the lives of the laboring poor through such concrete reforms as public education, land redistribution, and fair pay for workers. Grounded in these beliefs, Lippard resented the moral authority of Protestant ministers, whom he saw as largely indifferent to economic inequity, and held that fiction could edify the common people and call the privileged to account more effectively than sermons. “The great object of literature,” he declared, “is the social, mental and spiritual elevation of Man,” a commitment to didacticism that challenged the aesthetic philosophy of his friend Edgar Allan Poe, who in a December 1848 lecture on “The Poetic Principle” criticized the “heresy of The Didactic” and averred that the soul of poetry was not duty, truth, intellect, morality, or conscience but the contemplation of beauty. Lippard countered that literature “merely considered as an ART is a despicable thing” and that “A national literature without a great Idea is plainly a splendid church without a preacher or congregation.” American literature, including fiction, was not to be “splendid” for its own sake but the forum for a sermon to the multitude. His keen sense of the antagonism between the ministry and fiction led him to become the period’s most outspoken advocate for the idea that novelists should supersede ministers as the country’s moral leaders.

Lippard’s rivalry with preachers came to a head in the late 1840s in the pages of his newspaper, the Quaker City weekly, above all in the serialized novel with which he inaugurated it, Memoirs of a Preacher, A Revelation of the Church and Home (1849). But we see the seeds of competition much earlier, in the short fiction of the early 1840s and in The Quaker City. This chapter traces the deep roots of his religious ambition and anticlericalism, as seen in several early newspaper columns and stories, and explains the continuity between his religious views and Philadelphia Universalism of the 1840s. It then turns to how Lippard claimed moral authority for fiction by doing battle with ministers real and fictive in The Quaker City and Memoirs of a Preacher.
From Methodism to fiction

Lippard seemed destined for the Methodist ministry. As a child, he attended first a Mennonite church for a few years, then the local Methodist church where his parents were members. His unofficial religious instruction included listening to the itinerant Methodist preachers who visited the Lippard home tell tales of frontier evangelism and to his aunt describe the German pietists who had settled along Germantown’s Wissahickon creek in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Legend imputes early piety: he would supposedly gather his playmates into prayer meetings and conduct his own improvised services with exemplary “religious earnestness and decorum.”

A series of family tragedies in his youth may have intensified his religious seriousness; between 1830 and 1843, he lost his grandfather, mother, father, and two of his sisters.

Lippard even took a few steps down the path to ordination. He officially joined the Western Methodist Episcopal Church at age fifteen and, soon after, accepted the offer of a local woman to finance his education for the ministry. Encouraged by his pastor and church elders, he reportedly “jumped at the chance” despite the protests of his aunts and sisters. In 1837, he moved to Rhinebeck, New York, to attend a school that would prepare him to study at Middletown College (later Wesleyan University), with the goal of becoming a Methodist minister. The experiment did not last long. Lippard enjoyed his studies, especially the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, but chafed at the discrepancies he saw between Christian ideals and practice. As an adult, Lippard explained that he abandoned the ministry because one day, while he was walking with the Methodist minister with whom he boarded, the minister bought a bag of large, juicy peaches and devoured them without offering his pupil a single one. Lippard brooded over this behavior and decided, “If such are the fruits of piety, I will have none of it.” If the too-neat pun signals revisionary autobiography, the anecdote nonetheless reflects his adult belief that the clergy were sensual and selfish.

Whatever Lippard’s reasons, leaving school in 1837 was risky, as the country was plunging into one of the worst financial crises in its history. After briefly working as a legal assistant, Lippard abandoned a career in law for a bohemian life on the streets that allowed him to launch himself as a writer. Soon he had penned satirical newspaper columns for The Spirit of the Times and a couple of romances—The Ladye Annabel (1841) and Herbert Tracy, or The Legend of the Black Rangers (1842)—and by January 1843 was writing for the Citizen Soldier, a weekly newspaper supporting the state militia. He rose
to be its chief editor and writer just six months later, transforming it from a militaristic rag into a family newspaper that included sentimental verse, short religious essays, and fiction.¹³

Lippard’s *Citizen Soldier* writing adumbrates many of the religious attitudes that would define his mature work. A predilection for religious satire and sense of literature as a high calling is on display, for instance, in a mock sermon in “The Spermaceti Papers,” a column that caricatured the editorial staffs of the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Graham’s Magazine* for their delusional literary aspirations.¹⁴ The column lampooned “Spermaceti Sam,” based on the portly Samuel Patterson, editor of the *Post* between 1843 and 1845, and “Rumpus Grizzle,” or Rufus Griswold, editor of *Graham’s* in 1842 and 1843 and a licensed Baptist minister without a regular congregation. One of the most irreverent of Lippard’s “Spermaceti” columns mocks Sam’s and Grizzle’s self-congratulatory excitement as they hatch the idea for America’s next great periodical. In it Grizzle lays out the heads for a sermon on “fatness,” a metaphor for the worthless writing Lippard saw filling the pages of the *Post* and *Graham’s*. Grizzle takes for his text the inapt but verbally convenient “And Jeshuran waxed fat” (Deut. 32:15), then intones, “1st, Fatness considered as Fatness. 2d. Fatness considered as spermaceti. 3d. Fatness considered in relation to pork, especially pork prepared as ham.”¹⁵ Another line or two, and the joke warms up to ridiculing “grey ham,” or *Graham’s*. The sermon’s inanity mocks not only the repetitions and tautologies of evangelical preaching but also the American literary establishment’s failed pretensions to offer readers substantive literature. To parallel editing and preaching by mocking Griswold for delivering sermons stolen “from Tillotson and Taylor” and for padding his newspaper too heavily with recycled material was to raise the bar on magazine editing, casting it as a sacred vocation.

But Lippard was more than a satirist even in his early twenties. He was also beginning to write his own religious—and wildly sensational—fiction. “Adrian, the Neophyte,” for instance, which ran on two front page issues of the *Citizen Soldier* in the summer of 1843 and was soon printed as a thirteen-page pamphlet, represents religious devotion as noble and preaching as the highest imaginable calling.¹⁶ Raised a foundling in a Florentine monastery, Adrian is a pious nineteen-year-old who loves nothing more than to pray at sunset before a cross illuminated by sunbeams and to imagine the sublime spectacle of millions adoring the host. The story’s Catholicism is pure medieval romance, with Adrian’s prayers “made holy by intense and absorbing feeling” and the monastery described as an idyllic home graced with an
abbot’s fatherly love and the aesthetic delights of gorgeous organ music and the world’s most beautiful paintings. Adrian’s creed is simple: in the Abbot’s words, “God is thy Father—Christ the Blessed thy Brother—the Virgin thy Mother.” The story turns on Adrian’s special calling: since his childhood, the monastery has designated him “One Set-apart,” chosen to fulfill the order’s rule that once every hundred years, one brother will live continually apart from the rest, except for the single hour each year when he appears and gives a magnificent sermon: “from the pulpit of the Grand Chapel of the Cathedral, he shall speak to the multitude of the wonderful revelations made to his soul in the passing year.” It is a striking idealization of the potential power of a single sermon over a mass audience.

Before Adrian can commit himself to this hallowed life, he must pass a test: spend one month amid the temptations of the world—during Carnival, no less. He is assigned to play the harp for a beautiful countess engaged to marry a lord at the end of the month. Like Lippard’s own abortive religious calling, the experiment ends poorly. Adrian becomes infatuated with the flirtatious countess, and romantic passion entirely displaces religious devotion. Realizing that he can never have this woman, he despairs and declares himself eternally lost. The climax comes on the fateful day of both the countess’s wedding and Adrian’s consecration to his calling; the cathedral accommodates the ceremonies simultaneously at, respectively, white and black altars. Immediately after taking a vow of eternal solitude, Adrian looks across the cathedral, sees the bride, and rushes toward her with a dagger. Holding her at knifepoint, he curses her for making him lose his soul. If ever she knows a joy as dear as the thought of God was to him, then may that joy be torn from her! He also places on her the “curse of satiety,” so that she may drain all life’s pleasures to the dregs yet live on without desire. He flings down the dagger and falls to the floor, dead of a broken heart.

The powerful depiction of religious loss in “Adrian” mirrors Lippard’s own rejection of conventional religion and intimates the sense of religious crisis he may have felt in relinquishing his projected ministerial career and, it seems, Methodism. Adrian’s fall from grace has a poignancy that transcends its melodrama and resonates with other nineteenth-century crises of faith: “Oh, God—no longer mine—where now is my Religion? My beautiful religion of dreams and shadows? My faith of light? My belief of holy love and hallowed hope? [. . . ] Where is now my hope—my heaven—my life? Gone—gone—all gone!” Overwrought as it is, Adrian’s cry shares the spiritual despair of Thomas Carlyle’s Teufelsdröckh, Hawthorne’s Young Goodman Brown, and Thomas Hardy’s Jude. Spiritual despair, though, is not the keynote of Lippard, and the story’s positive valuations of religious belief and
experience prefigure the unorthodox piety of his later fiction. The beatific vision of the worshipping multitude valorizes the idea of a universal, classless religion, central to his thought in the late 1840s. Similarly, the monastery’s creed that God is the Father, Jesus the Brother, and the Virgin the Mother looks forward to his later affirmations that God is the father of the human family and Jesus the brother of the poor.\textsuperscript{17} Further, the hypothetical scenario of Adrian’s glorious annual sermon in the Grand Chapel—a vision never realized—reflects his fascination with preaching as a potential source of religious guidance and human wisdom and his disillusionment with it as likely to fall short of its promise due to human weakness and error.

Lippard’s religious earnestness and growing disenchantment with religious oratory are also evident in “Jesus the Democrat,” a\textit{Citizen Soldier} story from January 1844.\textsuperscript{18} It is set in a beautiful, crowded city church, where a preacher delivers an eloquent sermon from a marble pulpit. As the preacher details with “burning words” Jesus’ sympathy for the poor, criminal, sick, and outcast, the church door creaks open and an unkempt, prematurely aged man enters and totters down the aisle. Intent on the sermon, the congregants ignore the stranger and wipe away the not-unwelcome tears that well up as they sympathize with Christ’s sufferings. As the stranger collapses on the pulpit steps, a second stranger enters—this one, a handsome, well-dressed “man of the World” who attracts everyone’s notice. Oblivious, the preacher proclaims of Jesus: “look upon him in his tattered robes, his soiled apparel [ . . . ] and then think of his name—Jesus the friend of the People—\textit{Jesus the Democrat}.” At this climactic declaration, the dapper stranger morphs into a cloven-hooved, brimstone-scented devil, and the scraggly stranger on the steps rises, rushes toward the minister, and snatches away his Bible. The stranger is, of course, Jesus: his face and garments are transfigured and, bathed in light, he exits through the ceiling, rising “calmly on waves of golden air.” The revelation sends the preacher cowering and turns the devil to dust, right after he gloats over the congregation’s hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{19}

Like “Adrian,” this melodramatic fable contains the seeds of several religious ideas that would become central to Lippard’s work: that Jesus was himself a poor man who labored for and alongside the poor, that social snobbery is a ubiquitous yet egregious sin, and that even the best sermons do little to move listeners to action. It was a barbed rejoinder to ministers and others who held that the pulpit was supremely capable of inspiring listeners to act whereas fiction aroused feelings that had no outlet. “Jesus the Democrat” made the point that although a preacher in a respectable church might speak beautifully and even truly, and listeners might even weep, his rhetoric was an empty, self-indulgent performance.
Chapter 3

Lippard and Philadelphia Universalism

“Jesus the Democrat” captures the fusion of religious and social idealism that would define Lippard’s work through the mid- to late 1840s and early 1850s, a period during which he developed a much more liberal, rationalist faith intertwined with a commitment to social justice. His religiosity is generally regarded as shaped by an idiosyncratic blend of traditions: Methodism, of course, but also Hicksite Quakerism, Freemasonry, esotericism, and the German utopian communities that had flourished in Pennsylvania during the previous two centuries. One tradition that, while occasionally mentioned in passing with respect to his work, deserves fuller recognition is the Universalism of antebellum Philadelphia.

Like the Unitarianism that figures far more prominently in literary histories of antebellum America, Universalism was a form of liberal Protestantism that stressed rationalism and piety while rejecting Trinitarian doctrine and the need for an emotional conversion experience. Although the two denominations had much in common doctrinally (and would merge in 1961), they differed markedly in their social profiles. The Unitarians had grown out of the established church in New England and had money, privilege, education, and cultural capital. Universalists had much more populist origins. They traced their roots to the eighteenth-century English emigrant John Murray, a disciple of James Relly, a British evangelical preacher who broke with George Whitefield over the Calvinist doctrine that Christ had died only for the elect. Murray, following Relly, redefined the elect as all of humanity: if Christ died for all, then all would be saved. Dissenters at heart, Universalists argued for the separation of church and state, distrusted church hierarchies, cared little for college or seminary training, and were generally not among the socially and economically privileged. They were also, as the name implies, committed to the doctrine of universal salvation, an idea consonant with the democratic spirit and optimism of the post-Revolutionary period. One of the denomination’s most influential theologians was Elhanan Winchester, who in 1781 split from the orthodox Baptists to found the first Universalist Church in Philadelphia, the Society of Universal Baptists, which claimed as an attender physician and Declaration-signer Benjamin Rush. Winchester wrote one of the Universalists’ most important treatises, *Dialogues on the Universal Restoration* (1788), which maintained that because infinitude was a property only of God, not of sin or evil, punishment after death would be finite and conclude with the restoration of all things to God. A major theological shift in Universalism came in 1805 with Hosea Ballou’s *Treatise on Atonement*. It rejected the Calvinist assumption that God the Father needed
to be appeased through the death of Christ, arguing instead that the purpose of the atonement was to demonstrate God’s love for humanity. Ballou also held that a loving God had no interest in persecuting his children after death and that “hell” was a metaphor for separation from God in this life. Although Ballou’s influence on the denomination was tremendous, not all Universalists wanted to dispense with the idea of hell, and dissension arose between those who held the “Restorationist” position that wrongdoers needed to endure some compensatory pain after death before being restored to God and the “ultra-Universalists” who believed that God confined punishment to earthly existence.

Universalism had a strong presence in Philadelphia from the founding of Winchester’s church until about 1845. The first national convention of Universalists met there in 1790, and through the 1840s Universalism was a popular alternative to evangelicalism among the working classes. For the city’s white, native-born artisans and mechanics, it was a means of affirming Protestant identity and mutual solidarity while resisting the cultural and political dominance of the orthodox clergy. It was also much more politically radical than evangelicalism. From the 1820s until the Panic of 1837, Universalists and Free Enquirers were the two main radical groups in Philadelphia that challenged capitalism by espousing the labor theory of value. First Universalist Church was, in fact, a seedbed for labor organizing in the 1820s. There minister Abner Kneeland sponsored a discussion society for labor advocates; William Heighton delivered an address that rallied Philadelphia workers to the Mechanics’ Union of Trade Associations, “the nation’s (and perhaps the world’s) first bona fide labor movement” and a springboard to the creation of the Philadelphia Working Men’s Party; and Theophilus Fisk pastored before leaving the denomination in the 1830s to become a radical labor leader who advocated for an eight-hour workday when workers were striking for ten, coined the term “white slavery,” and wrote such incendiary speeches-turned-tracts as “Capital Against Labor” and “Labor, the Only True Source of Wealth.” Although Philadelphia Universalists gained members after the Panic of 1837, they were on the decline by the mid-1840s due to an upsurge in evangelicalism, financial difficulties left over from the depression, and waning radicalism, attributable in part to the influx of Irish immigrants. Nationally, Universalism hit its peak in 1847–1848 and tapered off after 1850.

Although Lippard does not seem to have joined a Universalist church, he had a strong link to the denomination in his friend Charles Chauncey Burr, minister from 1845 to 1847 of the Second Universalist Church, a Restorationist congregation. Burr was a gust of wind on the dying flame of the
city’s Universalism, a popular speaker whose “large meeting-house was filled, often to overflowing, during his entire term of service” and whose church was billed in 1847 as “one of the largest congregations in the city.” At Burr’s request, Lippard spoke to a packed house in Second Church following the publication and mass sensation of *The Quaker City*. Burr also officiated at Lippard’s unconventional wedding on the banks of the Wissahickon in 1847, wrote a glowing biographical essay on him that was printed as a preface to *Washington and His Generals* (1847), and in 1848 featured him as a contributor to his reformist periodical, *The Nineteenth Century*, which included essays by, among others, Fisk and Horace Greeley, another Universalist. Burr was even expected to write a biography of Lippard after his death, a volume that never materialized.

Beyond the personal and professional connections to Burr and his circle, Lippard advocated religious and social values that overlapped significantly with those of his Universalist and ex-Universalist peers. Given that the denomination was losing power as an institution in Philadelphia and elsewhere in the late 1840s and early 1850s, it is perhaps most productive to think of him as picking up where the Universalists as such were leaving off. Borrowing the language of Raymond Williams, one might say that he drew on structures of feeling and belief constitutive of a residual cultural formation, a labor-oriented Universalism, to advance an emergent form of nonevangelical, anti-ecclesiastical, yet still religiously committed social and political radicalism—one that fed into the renewed radicalism coalescing in Philadelphia in the late 1840s with the arrival of English Chartists in the 1840s and of German refugees starting in 1846. Lippard’s residually Universalist form of radicalism was defined by equal measures of love for humanity and righteous anger at social and economic oppression. Doctrinally, Universalists in Philadelphia from the 1820s through the 1840s stressed, as part of the commitment to universal redemption, the loving fatherhood of God and brotherhood of humanity, as well as a Biblicist pietism uninterested in the German higher criticism. They were united, too, by the many religious ideas and practices they opposed: Calvinism, revivals, sectarianism, church hierarchies, clerical greed and indifference to the poor, and often anti-Catholicism, since they regarded Catholics as a fellow religious minority oppressed by an evangelical majority. Socially and politically, they were radicals, opposing capital punishment, the banking system, all forms of authoritarianism, and the exploitation of labor by capital, while celebrating republicanism, egalitarianism, and producerism. These values permeate Lippard’s essays and fiction from the mid-1840s forward. One sees the doctrinal overlap between Lippard and his Universalist contemporaries in, for instance, the
narrator’s affirmation in *The Quaker City* that Jesus died “for all men’s sins, and all mankind’s salvation”; in Lippard’s declaration in an 1848 speech that America is an altar “to the Divine principle of brotherhood among men!”; and in the testimony of Charles Lester, the protagonist of *Memoirs*, that false religions deny “that principle of Universal Brotherhood which flowed from the life of Christ himself.” Lippard’s commitment to the Universalist doctrines of the brotherhood of humanity and the fatherhood of God was most pronounced in the pages of *The White Banner* (1851), the publication intended to be the organ of his secret society, the Brotherhood of the Union, but that appeared only once due to high production costs and limited funds. There he wrote that two Spirits had ever struggled for the mastery of souls: “One is a calm holy spirit, which, with clear eyes, and a loving heart, beholds in God the all-loving Father of an united Human Family—the Spirit of the Master, which we will attempt to embody in the word BROTHERHOOD.” The other is a Spirit that sees God as Father of only part of humanity and that thrives on sectarianism and results in atheism. The article “Religion” in *The White Banner* offered an even more clearly Universalist intermingling of religious and social visions. Equating religion with familial love and trust in a God who is “the Father of Us All,” it was also adamant about what religion was not:

Note-shaving is not Religion. Marble pillared churches are not religion. The swindling of poor men by learned Bishops in not religion. Robbing your neighbors six days in the week, and going to Church on the Seventh is not Religion. Devoting a life-time to gathering pennies is not Religion. Preaching a creed which teaches John the Presbyterian to hate James the Catholic, is not Religion. Religion is not found in elegant churches, or prettily bound books—much less is it heard from the lips of Smooth-speech, the polite preacher, or Sodom-speech, the wrath-preacher.

This statement of faith participates in the city’s Universalist tradition of linking true religion with advocacy for the poor and an opposition to capitalist exploitation, sectarianism, ecclesiasticism (especially the Presbyterian sort), anti-Catholicism, apolitical piety, and hellfire preaching. A few pages later Lippard condemned capital punishment, another social issue central to Universalist reformism, as he lambasted a ministerial contemporary for “blasphem[ing] the name of Christ by making him the prop of the Gallows, and turning his Gospel of Love into a Gospel of the Gibbet and the Hangman.” Like the Universalists who figured prominently in campaigns against the death penalty in the 1830s and 1840s on the grounds that it was
government-sanctioned vengeance unbefitting the children of a loving God, Lippard regularly condemned capital punishment as malicious and aligned “the gallows” and “the gibbet” with hatred for the poor. In the late 1840s Lippard also came to concur with the Universalists in rejecting the doctrine of eternal punishment, though he seems to have been ambivalent about relinquishing hell altogether. For instance, the 1848 short story “Jesus and the Poor,” which ran in both Burr’s Nineteenth Century and Lippard’s Quaker City weekly, includes a reworked episode from The Quaker City, in which a Mechanic confronts the Bank President whose bank has robbed the poor of their earnings and summons him to “the bar of God” the next morning. After the Mechanic commits suicide and the Bank Director dies of apoplexy the next day, the narrator asks whether the Bank Director has in fact “gone yonder to meet his victim.” The reply is equivocal: “The Good and Merciful God has flung between our eyes and the Shadow of Eternity an awful veil. Did we believe in the Heathen Creed which preaches an endless Hell, and has a Gibbet for its Gospel, we might follow up to Judgment the Soul of the Bank President.” Lippard added this second sentence to the original version of the scene in The Quaker City, suggesting his increased discomfort with the idea of hell. But unable to forego the pleasure of imagining justice executed in the afterlife, he kept the description of how the director, brought to the “Bar of Almighty Justice,” might “crouch and tremble” before God when confronted with his victims and even added new lines, not included in the novel, about how one might see the train of widows and orphans pouring lead on his soul. Then, backpedaling from this fantasy of judgment, he reiterated the uncertainty of the afterlife and asserted that the mere fact of the bank director’s death “preaches a lesson worth all the terrors of a creed-begotten Hell.” He renounced hell even more decisively in the late essay “The Bible. What It Is, and What It Is Not” (1854), which, eschewing visions of divine punishment, affirmed only that all creatures will “progress eternally”: “God is a Father. The entire race of man are his children. He did not create those children to be miserable here or hereafter.” Still, commentary on hell was rare in his writing, the religious commitments of which centered on the transformation of human society.

The most significant way Universalism seems to have influenced Lippard was in his preoccupation with justice—a major theological issue for Universalists, since affirming that God would save everyone raised the possibility that he did not reward good and punish evil. The theological split within Universalism can thus be seen as variant attempts to balance the moral scales set swinging by the prospect of universal redemption after death, with the Restorationists keeping hell, though one of limited duration,
and the ultra-Universalists holding that all sin finds retribution in this world. While Lippard seems to have had Restorationist sympathies, as suggested by his condemnation of those who preach everlasting punishment and his imaginative dalliances with the Bar of Almighty Justice, his fiction also suggests an affinity for the ultra-Universalist belief that God punishes sin in this life, a doctrine alive and well in antebellum Philadelphia. Fisk, for instance, preached it in *The Pleasures of Sin* (1827), a feverish sermon that justifies his successor’s comment that he drew ample audiences “gathered by sensational topics and held by sensational manner.” Indeed, Fisk’s sensationalism and popularity raise the possibility that Lippard may have borrowed both content and style from Philadelphia’s Universalist churches. From the text, “The way of transgressors is hard” (Prov. 13:15), Fisk argued that sin may give pleasure in the short term but leads inevitably to divine punishment in this life:

> There are flowers in the garden of guilty pleasure, but beneath them the speckled serpent hisses! [. . .] There are fountains and pools, but they contain nought but the black waters of despair. There vice may be seated upon a dazzling pavilion, decorated in all the shining apparel of this lower world—but the dagger of death is hid beneath her robe! Words may fall from her lips, but they are false as perjury—her touch is a pestilence—her touch contamination, despair and death!37

Serpents, fetid water, daggers of death, pestilence—Fisk was as adept with Gothic tropes as any revivalist preacher, or Lippard. To show that God met earthly vice with earthly punishments, Fisk summoned examples from the Hebrew Bible, including the swallowing of Jonah, the destruction of Jerusalem, the desolation of Babylon, and the fire and brimstone rained on Sodom and Gomorrah. God does not put off judgment but “brings every deed unto judgment as soon as committed, and brings upon every one that doeth evil, wrath, tribulation, and anguish.” In Lippard’s own day, Asher Moore, minister of First Church from 1840 to 1848, expounded on the doctrine of this-world retribution at length in *Universalism: The Doctrine of the Bible*, invoking the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and those destroyed in the Flood as prime examples of those who “suffered a premature and violent death as a punishment for their sins.”39

Echoing these Universalist preachers, Lippard offset a renunciation of hell with fictive representations of God punishing sin in the here and now. That is, his stories, in which time and again evildoers meet grisly ends, can be read as exempla of divine justice that do the theological work of Universalism by demonstrating how God acts in the world. A bank director’s
apoplexy or an adulteress’s poisoning may seem crudely improbable or sensational, but from a Universalist perspective they are revelatory, illuminating how God executes justice by smiting the wicked before our very eyes.

**Competing sermons at Reverend Pyne’s church**

Though not typically classed with the period’s didactic fiction, *The Quaker City* is intensely moralistic. In the introductory “The Origin and Object of this Book,” the dying lawyer enjoins the author to write a book that will further a litany of moral and religious ends: “To defend the sanctity of female honor; to show how miserable and corrupt is that Pseudo-Christianity which tramples on every principle ever preached or practiced by the Saviour Jesus; to lay bare vice in high places, and strip gilded crimes of their tinsel.”

Many scandalized readers, of course, saw no trace of Christian principle in the novel’s voyeuristic urban tour of drunkenness, public corruption, seduction, incest, and murder. To them, splattered brains and naked “snowy globes” did not “lay bare vice” but merely flesh, pandering to a depraved public appetite for sex and violence. There is no denying that the novel revels in the sensuality it condemns—that it dwells on the bodies of Dora, Mary, and Mabel, undresses the women whenever it can, lingers over Mary’s drug-induced sexual passion, and revels in a slew of gruesome deaths: the Widow Smolby’s skull slammed on an andiron, Dora poisoned and shrieking, Job Joneson writhing in apoplexy, Ravoni knifed in the back, Devil-Bug crushed under a rock, Algernon Fitz-Cowles burned to a crisp.

Yet for all its prurience and bloodlust, the novel promotes widely accepted moral values. The main storyline, Byrnewood Arlington’s quest to avenge his sister Mary’s seduction, upholds feminine “virtue” and middle-class sexual mores. A subplot advocates for the sanctity of female chastity regardless of class, as Arlington regrets his seduction of Annie, a serving girl, and seeks to rescue her from further depredations. The novel’s cast of rogues argues for countless other virtues: the drunk Monks, for temperance; the financial deceptions of Fitz-Cowles, for honest business practices; the duplicity of Reverend Pyne, for the clergy’s integrity; the adultery of Dora, for marital fidelity, and so on. When the novel pleads sympathy for the likes of Arlington, Bess, and Devil-Bug, the point is to encourage compassion for sinners who were themselves sinned against. And when it inflicts terrible punishments on wrongdoers, the point, as already suggested, is not only to shock or titillate but, more importantly, to reveal the ultimate goodness and justice of God. In terms of moral principle, perhaps the only significant way in which
the novel deviated from the contemporary status quo was its privileging of moral justice over human law, as when the narrator condones Arlington's murder of Lorrimer or allows Mabel to enjoy Livingstone's fortune through Devil-Bug's deception.

To emphasize that *The Quaker City* offered readers valuable moral guidance—and that they were unlikely to find a better guide in church—Lippard depicted the novel's only minister, the Reverend F. Altamont T. Pyne, as a full-blown scoundrel. An oily, tippling liar, Pyne uses his parishioners' charitable donations to feed his vices at Monk Hall and, in scenes that could hardly have been more shocking to nineteenth-century readers than to today's, tries to rape the girl he has raised as his daughter. His name is a rich joke. The aristocratic-sounding “Altamont,” or “high mountain,” mocks his pretensions, while “Pyne” situates him among the lower classes by suggesting his church's “uncomfortable benches of unpainted pine.” The pun with “fat pine,” or kindling, also alludes to his tendency to “blaze up in his sermons,” especially when preaching on hell, and to his fitness for the eternal flames. That F. A. T. Pyne's given name is “Dick Baltzar” may also be a joke about the lust lurking beneath the clerical façade. Pyne both borrows from the stock “reverend rake” figure popular in the period's sensational fiction and alludes more immediately to a major church scandal of 1844, the trial of New York Episcopalian bishop Benjamin T. Onderdonk for inappropriate and unwanted sexual behavior with several women in his church. Yet Lippard in “Key to the Quaker City” (1845) discouraged readers from identifying Pyne too closely with any one minister, maintaining that Pyne personified the clergy's worst vices and that in Philadelphia there were “no less than three Rev. Dr. Pynes.”

Chapter 3 of Book 3, set in the dingy upstairs lecture room of Pyne's “Free Believers and True Repenters” church, is a central scene in the novel's moral landscape. Here Lippard both mocked the city's preaching as sheer bigotry and set forth two counter-sermons advocating a compassionate, sentimentalized Christian ethic. Unwilling to fight the preaching of his day with story alone, he wrote as if people needed to hear, or read, better sermons.

Pyne's sermon caricatures the ignorance and parochialism of the city's anti-Catholic preaching, but as the novel's only represented sermon, it also comments on the city's preaching more generally, a point highlighted by the diverse congregation composed of “male of female, old and young, high and low, rich and poor.” The service centers on the commissioning of three missionaries being sent to Rome to convert the Pope to the “Universal Patent Gospel,” or, as Pyne jingoistically calls it, the “American Patent Gospel.” Either way, the concept of a “patent gospel” epitomizes the divisiveness and
sectarianism of Pyne’s preaching. His doctrine is, in his words, “a gospel of fire and brimstone and abuse o’ the Pope o’ Rome, mingled in equal quantities—about half o’ one and half o’ tother.” He denounces the Pope, Monks, Nuns, all the Sisters of Charity, and the orphans in their care; calls for the firing of all Catholics and a renewal of the Inquisition; and praises John Calvin, whom he lauds for burning Servetus at the stake. The sermon brings together everything Lippard loathed about religious orthodoxy: Calvinism, anti-Catholicism, self-righteousness, narrow-mindedness, and disregard for the poor. Even the sermon's form is offensive; Pyne’s exclamations beginning with “Down with” and “Up with” belonged to political sloganeering, not the pulpit. The Free Believer congregation is also held up for ridicule, as they greet the wild tale of the Pope turning a group of tract-wielding American Patent Gospellers into sausages with deafening shouting and foot-stomping and a “perfect hurricane of applause,” which sounds “like the voice of some huge monster.” In Memoirs, Lippard would revisit and revise this cynical commentary on the preaching favored by the common people.

Just as the transfigured Jesus in “Jesus the Democrat” rises as a silent rebuke to the preacher and his congregation, so here a pious individual rises to correct the assembled Christians. As the applause dies down, an old man stands and identifies himself as an American citizen who fought as a boy alongside his father and George Washington during the Revolution. For Lippard, whose patriotism was a form of religious faith, a Revolutionary War veteran embodied heroism and virtue far more reliably than any minister. The Free Believers wait eagerly to hear the veteran endorse their intolerance, but instead he dares to question the project of sending missionaries to Rome. He has had a “passing thought” while “our Reverend Brother was enchaining you all with his eloquence”; Quaker-like, he prefers his own fleeting—and possibly divinely inspired—thoughts to the minister’s bombast. The speech that follows claims a moral equivalence to preaching by bearing all the markers of sermonic voice: theological diction, oratorical sentence structures, a tone of conviction about moral and religious truths, and an element of hope or redemption. It also mirrors Lippard’s own moral and religious preoccupations, elaborating on an earlier authorial footnote that censured hypocritical public leaders, including ministers, and affirmed that “For the religion of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Intercessor, the author of this work has a fixed love and reverential awe.” The veteran explains what this “religion of Jesus Christ” might look like by asking whether the missionaries might not be better employed in Philadelphia: “Are there no holes of vice, to be illumined by the light of God’s own gospel? Are there no poor, no sick, no needy?” With rising passion, he calls for the church to send its missionaries into the city.
These “home missionaries” could help the orphans deprived of the $2 million left them by Stephen Girard (one of Lippard’s hobby-horses), cure the city’s “hideous moral sores,” and denounce the city’s wine-drinking, slanderous, seducing, mob-inciting ministers by telling them, “as God will tell them one day, that they are a blot upon the name of Jesus!” On this last point the veteran glows white-hot: “[T]hese are not the characteristics of God’s own Ministers, but rather the fuel with which the Devil will kindle a hell for their souls!”

Ironically, the speech that starts so humbly and condemns ministers who make “violent appeals to excited mobs” ends up nearly as overheated as Pyne’s sermon.

The messages, though, are quite different. The veteran’s speech is a prime example of what Edmund Arens has called prophetic preaching: that which objects in the name of God to the prevailing conditions of “political, social, economic, and religious injustice.” Rather than aiming to build individual piety or reform behavior, prophetic preaching critiques the morality of social institutions and practices. Like any preaching, it cannot be wholly negative; it must share the “promise of a new, just, and benevolent order.” Accordingly, the veteran’s preaching condemns ministerial vice and corruption while exhorting listeners to adopt a compassionate, self-sacrificing ethic focused on caring for the city’s poor and sick. In a novel much more concerned with exposing vice than mapping reform, the veteran’s call for home missionaries is one of the few specific proposals for ameliorating poverty.

The veteran’s rhetorical thrashing of the ministry compensates for the serious physical punishment the story itself never gives Pyne. Whereas the seducers Lorrimer and Fitz-Cowles endure “premature and violent death[s] as a punishment for their sins,” as Moore described the workings of God’s justice, the embezzling, hate-mongering would-be rapist Pyne gets a virtual slap on the hand. He is tickled, threatened with a poker, and pitched down a stairway, incidents from which he emerges bruised but not broken. When in the denouement a newspaper reports that he is being brought to trial for seducing the daughter of a wealthy merchant, the story does not follow through to a verdict; the minister is left literally unjudged. It may be that Lippard feared that jailing or killing off even a vile clergyman would make an already scandalous novel seem simply antireligious.

Incensed, the Free Believers and True Repenters toss the veteran into the street. The reader, however, cannot yet leave the pews. A new preacher rises in the veteran’s place—the narrator, giving Lippard another chance to condemn Pyne, as well to complement the veteran’s call to social action with an appeal to sentimental piety. As Pyne prays, the narrator launches into sermonic voice, beginning, “Prayer! Ho, Ho! Was that a fiend’s laugh as he
heard the mockery of that prayer ascend in tones of blasphemy to the very throne of God? The diatribe that follows is a string of scornful rhetorical questions infused with indignation that Pyne is profaning the name of Jesus with his “curses, falsehoods, and impious vulgarities.” Then, shifting tone, the narrator tempers condemnation with uplift through rhetorical questions that propose that prayer is the young mother whispering to her first-born, or the father trembling at the bedside of his dying daughter. This sermonic redefinition of prayer argues for a sentimental piety that sanctifies secular emotions, in particular the poignancy of parental love and so, by extension, the parent-child relationships central to the novel—those of Devil-Bug, John Davis, and the Arlingtons with their daughters. Oddly enough, and suggestive of how Lippard’s sentimentalism was always sliding into sensationalism, the narrator’s sacralization of familial feeling has its material analogue in the twin marble statues of Religion and Love in Dora Livingstone’s sumptuous boudoir.

The seductive preaching of Ravoni the Sorcerer

The most compelling preacher in The Quaker City is not a Christian minister at all but the enigmatic Ravoni the Sorcerer, an unexpectedly complex figure in a novel rife with moral dichotomies. A beautiful courtier to the kings of pre-Revolutionary France and consummate physician and surgeon, he has discovered the secret of eternal youth and seeks to while away eternity by founding a new religion. Besides being a figurative and perhaps literal seducer of women, he is a spiritual seducer of both sexes, one who allures followers with appealing doctrines and beautiful speech while robbing them of their autonomy. Lippard uses him to underscore the dangers of giving oneself over to powerful preaching of any sort, no matter how persuasive.

That Ravoni cannot be read as satire is evident from the overlap between his “New Faith” and Lippard’s own religious values, especially those articulated in “Adonai, the Pilgrim of Eternity” (1849) and other late pieces. Like Lippard, Ravoni condemns the violence done throughout history in the name of God and envisions a future free of war, crime, and the class divide between rich and poor. He also rejects institutional religion, promising that the coming utopia will have no clergy and that families will worship in their homes. His defiant declaration that the new faith will arise “in the name of Man and for the good of Man!” echoes Lippard’s own insistence that religion tend to humanity’s physical needs. Ravoni goes, though, perhaps a step beyond Lippard’s own religious idealism in his Emersonian exaltation of a
de-Christianized God immanent in the natural world: “Through all matter, through sun and sky and earth and air, he lives, the soul of the Universe! We are all beams of his light, rays of his sun; as imperishable as his own glory! To us all, he has entrusted powers, awful and sublime.”58 The declaration flirts with parody, but Lippard lends it credibility with an authorial footnote clarifying that the speaker presumably intends a reference to the “doctrine of magnetic influence” that pervades space, linking all humans to one another and to God.

That Ravoni’s sermon, unlike Pyne’s, is eloquent and plausible signals readers to be wary not simply of religious fanaticism but of all religious oratory, in much the same way that Moby-Dick warns against the dangers of succumbing to a powerful, well-spoken visionary. Like Ahab, Ravoni is no workaday preacher but a popular leader of that distinctive sort Max Weber associated with charismatic authority, in which the leader breaks from conventional institutions and systems to declare a new order, inspiring followers to consider him divine.59 When Ravoni tells his congregants they are beams of God’s light, they respond with star-struck fervor, hailing him as a god. His sermon is ineffably powerful; it is vain to try to describe his hand, eye, expression, or voice, which strikes “the mysterious chords of every heart.”60 As with other charismatics, seeming divinity cloaks serious moral flaws. Besides the fact that as a mesmerist he wields an unfair advantage over his listeners, he employs resurrection men to steal dead bodies; drugs Annie so he can “resurrect” her to demonstrate his power to his disciples; attempts, like Pyne, to exploit Mabel for his own purposes; and has abused his role as a physician to collect an entourage of beautiful young women from around the world. For those readers who might not see past Ravoni’s dazzle, Lippard has the narrator call him an “eloquent Blasphemer” and includes as a footnote the disclaimer that his speeches are “not the opinions of the author, but of the character” and that he does “not hold himself responsible for a single word or line.”61

With Ravoni, Lippard cautioned readers against falling for dynamic, appealing preaching—the kind that could disarm even the virtuous. Luke Harvey is drawn into Ravoni’s circle of disciples against his will and after hearing him is “no more himself,” shouting with the others, “We are thine! [. . . ] I am thine!”62 Mabel is offered a chance to leave Ravoni but chooses to stay when she meets his magnetic gaze. His ability to master otherwise admirable individuals fleshes out the offhand cynicism of Sylvester Petriken, who muses that if his magazine fails, he might as well become a preacher: “Why not start a Church of my own? When a man’s fit for nothin’ else, he can always find fools enough to build him a church, and glorify him into a
The talented, energetic Ravoni is all the more dangerous because he reels in not the fools alone but the young and idealistic. Moving beyond the caricature of Pyne, Lippard used Ravoni to put readers on their guard against any preachers exercising impressive oratorical powers.

The preachy narrator of *The Quaker City*

Though critical of how preaching could manipulate its hearers, Lippard did not hesitate to tap its emotive power for fiction by assigning his narrator numerous didactic digressions, many of which exult in God’s punitive justice. Many of these digressions stop short, though, of sermonic voice as I have defined the term. While including distinctive stylistic features of the sermon, such as biblical language and oratorical cadences, they do not offer or imply the message of hope or redemption essential to sermonic voice, promising instead only punishment for the wicked. One of the most striking of these near-sermonic moments appears immediately after Mary’s seduction. In it Lippard practices a sleight of hand in which he treats his own imagination—his ability to spin legends dramatizing moral ideals—as the basis for religiously authoritative speech. After pointing ominously to the darkness and silence of the Rose Chamber, the narrator relates a purported legend. An “old book of mysticism and superstition” says that far off in the sky hangs an invisible Awful Bell that angels toll when the Unpardonable Sin is committed on earth:

> The peal of the Bell, hung in the azure depths of space, announces to the Guilty one, that he is an outcast from God’s mercy for ever, that his Crime can never be pardoned, while the throne of the Eternal endures; that in the hour of Death, his soul will be darkened by the hopeless prospect of an eternity of wo; wo without limit, despair without hope; the torture of the never-dying worm, and the unquenchable flame, forever and forever.⁶⁴

If there is only one unpardonable sin, the narrator continues, it is the “foul wrong” committed that day in the Rose Chamber of Monk-Hall. While the language of the passage is sermonic, the purport is not. Principles are declared with oratorical rhythms, conviction, and biblical diction—the final phrases rework Mark 9:44, “where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched”—but this moment holds no glimmer of hope or redemption. It is a curse, not a sermon. In contrast with Mark 9, in which Jesus says, “If thy hand offend thee cut it off,” because it is better to go through life with one hand than to go to hell with two, the novel offers no such hope here that
severance of the appropriate member will save one’s soul. Indeed, this passage may be as close as Lippard ever came to endorsing the idea of an eternal hell. The threat seems real enough, except that it comes from a mystical, superstitious old book, which might seem to allude to the Bible if the Bible ever mentioned an Awful Bell, and calls rape, rather than “blaspheming the Holy Ghost,” the “unforgivable sin.” To be sure, Lippard’s revision might itself be considered blasphemous in its implication that a woman’s body is as sacred as God’s spirit. As in the vision of the Bank Director before the Bar of Almighty Justice, the narrator raises the possibility that the wicked will endure everlasting punishment, even while elsewhere disclaiming the doctrine. The passage sounds like immutable malediction yet is in substance a fanciful melodramatic flourish.

Devil-Bug’s apocalyptic dream-vision, “The Last Day of the Quaker City,” is by far the novel’s fullest elaboration of this sort of quasi-sermonizing, in which an imagined scenario is presented as the basis for authoritative-sounding biblical and oratorical language. In setting forth this eschatological vision, Lippard sidestepped the problem of hell by postulating an awesome, supernatural, this-worldly scenario of divine justice—one that invokes, like the Universalist preachers, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. When the vision opens, Devil-Bug is delighted by the dystopia he beholds. A royal palace sits where Independence Hall used to be; a new nobility lords over the poor; preachers have brought back the gallows. Then the real nightmare begins: the dead rise from their graves, and “Wo unto Sodom” appears in flaming letters across the sky. Hideous scenes unfurl: ten thousand corpse-piloted coffins floating on the river, a war between armies of the dead, corpses marching next to the clergy in the city’s grand procession, horror when the living see the dead at their sides, a sky full of red thunderbolts striking down the living, tidal waves of land swallowing the corpses. The Ghost, a Virgilian tour guide to the apocalypse, gets the last, almost-sermonic word. He exhorts Devil-Bug to witness with the angels the destruction of the Doomed City and to shout with them, “Wo, WO UNTO SODOM.” Again, damnation is threatened without hope for redemption.

The one truly sermonic moment in the vision comes when the narrator reveals that the destruction of the old world precedes the founding of a new one. The narrator’s song of joy celebrates the impending elevation of the poor, when “the God of the Poor would arise in his might, and crush the lordlings under the heel of his power!” Here, for once, the narrator mitigates declarations about how God will punish the wicked with a clear vision of salvation. The song is prophetic on two fronts, both denouncing injustice and promising a benevolent order to come:
Joy to ye all! Your God arises; his arm is uplifted; already the rumbling of his chariot wheels draw near! No more hunger now, no more crying for bread. No more huddling down in squalor, and want, and cold. The avenger comes—Shout ye poor, shout from your factories and work-benches, from your huts and dens of misery—shout!

This passion for the physical redemption of the working poor would define the last decade of Lippard’s life, leading him to found the Brotherhood of the Union, whose members vowed to support the principle that “Every human creature hath a right to Life, Liberty, Land and Home; to the means and circumstances of temporal, moral and spiritual development.”

The song of joy in Devil-Bug’s vision is an unusually upbeat moment of sermonizing for the narrator of The Quaker City, typically more intent on announcing that God will judge the rich than that he will save the poor. When, for instance, the banker Joneson suffers a sudden and agonizing death on the floor of Davis the mechanic, a scene Lippard truncated for “Jesus and the Poor,” the narrator points to the dead body and intones with the alternately lyrical and emphatic rhythms of a skilled preacher:

He had obeyed the subpoena of the Suicide; he had gone to meet his pale Accuser before the Throne of Eternity.
God is just.
This is a truth we often hear preached, but it falls upon our ears with a hollow sound.
God is just.
Come hither, all the world, come to the chamber of Want and Suicide, and gaze upon this picture of God’s Justice.

This dark funeral sermon underscores that Joneson’s sudden death represents the workings of divine justice while getting in a dig at ministers. Readers have heard about God’s justice from preachers, but the novelist is the one who can show “all the world” the greedy banker purple and writhing on the floor. Unlike a preacher, though, the narrator addresses not those who should mend their ways to avoid divine judgment but those who might be tempted to take justice into their own hands. The city contains hundreds of villains like Joneson, but “Let them all pass—God is just.” It is a Psalmic sermonic meditation: sooner or later, God will smite our enemies.

Reflecting the narrator’s penchant for reveling in the prospect of divine judgment, one of the novel’s most insistent and protracted sermonic moments comes when the narrator warns the rich that God will hold them
to a higher standard. When Devil-Bug realizes that Mabel is his daughter and begins to remember his love for her mother Ellen, the narrator steps in to defend him and to exhort readers who have enjoyed comfortable circumstances not to hold themselves superior to the Monk Hall doorkeeper. The sermon begins with a long rhetorical question that implicitly takes as its text Jesus's apothegm, “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required”:

Oh, tell us, ye who in the hours of infancy, have laid upon a mother’s bosom, who have basked in a father’s smile, who have had wealth to bring you comfort, luxury, and a home, who have sunned in the light of religion as you grew toward manhood, and been warmed into intellectual life by the blessing of education; Oh, tell us, ye who with all these gifts and mercies, flung around you by the hand of God, have, after all, spurned his laws, and rotted in your very lives, with the foul pollution of libertinism and lust; tell us, who shall find most mercy at the bar of Avenging Justice—you, with your prostituted talents, gathering round your guilty souls, so many witnesses of your utter degradation, or Devil-Bug, the door-keeper of Monk-Hall, in all his monstrous deformity of body and intellect, yet with one redeeming memory, gleaming like a star, from the chaos of his sins?  

Whereas the sermon after Joneson’s death indicts only capitalists who participate in “legalized robbery,” this one sets its sights on a much wider audience—those who have enjoyed the advantages of a comfortable upbringing yet have gone on to pursue “libertinism and lust,” euphemisms for such urban, male entertainments as drinking, theater-going, and brothel-visiting. The passage evinces a decided class-consciousness in its insinuation that God calibrates moral standards to one’s material and spiritual advantages, employing a logic similar to that which Harriet Jacobs would use to dissuade her privileged readers from sneering at her sexual transgressions: “But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, [. . .] do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!”

The sermon catalyzed by Devil-Bug’s surge of feeling for Ellen continues for three more paragraphs, a passage that would be hard to miss in a less sprawling novel. As if in retort to moralists who condemned novels for corrupting the young by creating sympathy for criminals, the narrator declares that people such as Devil-Bug should be pitied because the community failed them by not providing religious instruction: “And in this great city, there are thousands upon thousands hidden in the nooks and dens of vice, who, like Devil-Bug of Monk-Hall, have never heard that there is a Bible, a Savior, or a
“God!” It is a nonsectarian critique of the city’s ministers for neglecting their religious obligations and a claim for the preacherly abilities of narrator and novel, underscored in the subsequent, oratorical, thrice-repeated cry that the poor have not heard that there is “a Bible, a Savior, or a God!” The sermonic interlude’s final and most emphatic point condemns those who disregard the bodily suffering of the poor. Like the outspoken veteran, the narrator castigates the Quaker City and, implicitly, its clergy for sending missionaries abroad without having “one single throb of pity, for the poor, who starve, rot and die, within its very eyesight!” Later in the 1840s Lippard would continue to critique foreign missionary work while also arguing that the poor might avoid starvation by organizing themselves into labor unions and mutual aid societies rather than waiting for others to notice them and feel throbs of pity.

After *The Quaker City* appeared in print, Lippard refuted charges of its immorality with more preaching against the clergy in “Key to the Quaker City: or, The Monks of Monk Hall” (1845), a twelve-page appendix much less well known today than Stowe’s longer, freestanding *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853). Lippard’s “Key” first pointed to real-life analogues for the story’s characters and settings and clarified the backstory involving the two girls born on Christmas Eve in 1824 and 1825. Then, waxing sermonic, Lippard resumed his denunciation of the ministry by asserting that Devil-Bug’s dream depicted the end result “of the corruptions of republican principles” and that the city’s principal purveyors of corruption were greedy capitalists, office-hungry politicians, and, above all, the “idle and pampered priesthood.” Much like Frederick Douglass in the “Appendix” to his *Narrative*, Lippard stressed that he opposed not Christianity itself, but ministers’ perversion of the faith. Assuming the role of a rival preacher, he warned that God would judge those hypocritical ministers who were “wont to ride rough-shod over the souls of the poor” and who, after indulging their vices, showed up in church to preach boring or fanatical sermons. Lippard drove home his indictment of ministerial malfeasance by excoriating the Episcopal priests who had authorized the sale of the scandalous transcripts of Onderdonk’s trial and cataloguing an arsenal of ministerial sins: ignoring the suffering of the poor, preaching irrelevant or polemical sermons, threatening nonbelievers with eternal damnation, advocating capital punishment, and supporting overseas missions. Lippard closed the “Key” with a lengthy excerpt from a contemporary review that extolled his novel as supremely moral—“There is a deeper and holier moral in this work, than in any American novel of the age”—and that argued that the novel showed “how pure was the religion of the Saviour: how utterly corrupt is the superstition and big-
In juxtaposing a condemnation of ministerial vice with a reviewer’s praise for *The Quaker City*’s morality and piety, Lippard promoted a logic of supersession, in which righteous novels would assume the ministerial function of providing the public with moral leadership.

The idea that a novel should come before the public as a preacher also informed the 1849 preface to *The Quaker City*, where the sermonic tone is more paternal than prophetic. Here Lippard explained that he had learned about vice in Philadelphia by working in an Attorney-General’s office, “the Confessional of our Protestant communities,” a metaphor that sought to authorize his writing as an outgrowth of the priestly role he had played in the community. After defending his honesty and purity, he closed the preface with a long, didactic address to the young men and women who might read his book, beseeching them to reject anything in its pages that seemed immoral or impure or that conflicted “with the great idea of Human Brotherhood, promulgated by the Redeemer.” The address ended with the rhythmic imperatives and biblical language of a sermon’s peroration: “Take the book with all its faults and virtues. Judge it as you yourself would wish to be judged. Do not wrest a line from these pages, for the encouragement of a bad thought or a bad deed.”

Preacher-like, Lippard assumed the stance of one who held himself responsible for the morality of his audience.

**Memoirs of a Preacher**

In the latter half of the 1840s, Lippard increasingly represented novelists and ministers as rivals, a tendency on full display in *Memoirs of a Preacher: A Revelation of the Church and Home* (1849), the novel that kicked off his story paper, the *Quaker City* weekly, on December 30, 1848. The very fact that he had taken to producing a weekly paper with the masthead motto, “A Saturday Paper for Universal Circulation,” suggests his desire to rival the clergy. *Memoirs* began on the front page, preceded by a Prologue written as an open letter to Pennsylvania Episcopal Bishop Alonzo Potter. This letter may be the most overt instance in antebellum letters of a novelist rebuking a minister and declaring the moral superiority of novels to organized religion. Lippard began with a pose of humility—“I am conscious of the immeasurable distance which separates an humble Author from a Bishop”—but was soon attacking Potter for calling French novels insipid and immoral. Indignant, he asked Potter whether he had actually read Eugène Sue’s *Wandering Jew, Mysteries of Paris*, or *Martin the Foundling*, each of which dem-
onstrated distinct moral virtues. Sue, he declared, was a more effective and earnest moral leader than any Bishop: “[H]ave not his Fictions embodied the Truth, in language more forcible and with greater sincerity of heart than ten thousand Diocesan sermons?” Guns blazing, he contrasted the morality of French novels with the immorality of the church, pointing an accusing finger at the publication of Onderdonk’s trial proceedings, Trinity Church’s ownership of tenement slums and a red-light district in New York City, and the “Borgian luxury” of English bishops who took in $200,000 a year while hundreds of thousands died during the Irish famine. He even exhorted Potter personally: “Think of this, Reverend Sir. Think of it when you are alone. Look it in the face. Slowly, quietly, immerse your soul in the awful importance of the subject.” He concluded by declaring that he would write a novel that would not merely stand above the Bishop’s censure but also “accomplish much good.” As in his “Key,” he maintained that he was not against all ministers, only the corrupt ones, and that his novel would depict one of the many humble preachers who as a home missionary “visits the haunts of fever, poverty, and pestilence.” Its aim would be not to trash negative examples but to celebrate a worthy, self-denying minister.76

As with so many prospectuses, the description did not match the work that unfolded. Memoirs depicts in lurid detail two wicked ministers and presents only briefly and ambiguously a compassionate and self-sacrificing one. Even more directly than The Quaker City, Memoirs argues that novelists must usurp the ministerial role of moral leadership and reveals Lippard’s envy of preachers’ ability to address audiences without the mediation of print.

Set in Philadelphia in 1843, Memoirs is a fast-paced story centered, like The Quaker City, on plots of seduction, revenge, and inheritance. The protagonist is Charles Lester, a young man determined to find the scoundrel minister who married his sister then libeled her in the newspapers, driving her to an early grave. This minister is soon revealed to be the “Popular Preacher,” also known as Edmund Jervis, whom Lester finds enrapturing thousands at a large Philadelphia church. Immediately after the sermon, Jervis whisks away a poor young woman, Fanny, from the mourners’ bench to the mansion of a wealthy capitalist friend. This capitalist, Caleb Goodleigh, has had two past lives—one as a licentious obstetrician (like the priest, the physician poses a threat because he can abuse his private access to women) and one as an importer of slaves from Africa who once sunk an entire ship of human “cargo” at sea to elude the authorities. Deep within Goodleigh’s labyrinthine home, Jervis mesmerizes Fanny so she can serve as a clairvoyant for him. He intends to seduce her afterward but, like Pyne with Mabel, never quite gets the chance.
The Popular Preacher has a Catholic analogue in the Converted Monk, the novel’s other reprobate cleric. Years before, when the mother of Fanny and her brother Ralph lay dying and half-delirious after childbirth, she called in the Converted Monk, an ex-priest named Lemuel Gardiner, who convinced her to bequeath her fortune, including her children’s inheritance, to his church to ensure her salvation. Gardiner is as thorough a rascal as Jervis. Besides exemplifying the duplicity of Catholic priests by never having converted from Catholicism at all, he has seduced the mother’s impoverished cousin, driving her to obtain an abortion, and, after the mother’s death, laid claim to the dead woman’s estate and her two young children, Harry and Ann, soon renamed Fanny and Ralph. The mother’s cousin stole the children and raised them as her own but now is dying and about to leave them destitute. Fanny is on the brink of falling prey to one of several seducers prowling about, including Jervis, and Ralph is contemplating a life of crime. For these two, a corrupt priest has been the root of all evil.

True to Lippard’s practice of meting out providential endings, justice is eventually served all round. The orphans’ inheritance is restored, Fanny and Charles Lester marry, and virtually all the humble but moral characters end up farming their own land in Indiana. The villainous clergymen are both punished. Like Pyne, Jervis gets a relatively mild comeuppance—public humiliation after he proves himself a coward in a fire, and a near-lynching in Indiana after he tries to pull off a sham marriage with Fanny. Gardiner comes in for harsher treatment, suggesting that Lippard was less tolerant of Catholics than his satire of Pyne’s anti-papalism might imply. Bent on murder-suicide, Gardiner sets Goodleigh’s mansion on fire, locking himself and the capitalist in a tiny, airless iron room in the center of it. After being tortured as the walls heat up, priest and capitalist perish together in the inferno, their charred bodies found clasped together in a death struggle. It is an apt punishment for both. The priest has died because of his ties to moneyed power and his vindictive desire to punish someone, and the capitalist has suffered his own fatal middle passage in cramped and suffocating quarters, dying “the death of a leprous negro in a burning ship.”

And what of the promised humble home missionary? He appears early on as the minor character William Marvin, an older, obscure Millerite preacher who wears a plain, threadbare coat and lives alongside and ministers to the poorest of the poor. Because he nursed Lester’s brother during a bout of smallpox, Lester entrusts him with the $15,000 that belong to Fanny and Ralph and enjoins him to find the children or, if he has not found them within a year, to donate the money to the charity of his choice. Marvin’s protestations of unworthiness vouch for his honesty. But then Marvin disap-
pears for almost the entire novel, displaced as a comforter of the poor by his
dughter and a Quaker woman, suggesting that if Lippard saw authors taking
over the ministerial function of providing the public with moral guidance, he
imagined women filling ministers’ traditional role of aiding the poor. Mar-
vin returns at the end only to help run a massive camp meeting convened to
await the projected Second Coming—which ends with the disappointment
and humiliation of Christ’s nonappearance. The Prologue’s claims notwith-
standing, Lippard could not rein in his hostility toward the clergy. Even the
novel’s sympathetic minister is deluded and pitiable.

While all the novel’s ministers come in for serious critique, the light-
ning rod for Lippard’s anticlericalism is Jervis, who, like Ravoni, is both a
seductive public speaker and a literal seducer of women. Lippard avoided
identifying him with any one minister by first calling him only the “Popular
Preacher,” then later revealing that “Jervis” is a pseudonym, but his character
would have reminded antebellum readers of at least two ministers notorious
for their personal lives, Episcopalian Samuel Farmar Jarvis (1786–1851) and
Methodist John Newland Maffitt (1794–1850). Jarvis, a wealthy Episcopa-
lian minister, had been tried for marital cruelty in a much-publicized 1839
case in Connecticut. Although better known as an antiquarian and scholar
than as a preacher, Jarvis allegedly had smooth, cosmopolitan manners and
a “quite prepossessing” appearance that may have inspired Jervis’s urban-
ity and good looks. In a civil trial, Jarvis’s wife Sarah charged her husband
with a decade’s worth of outrages, including physically abusing her and their
children, failing to support her financially, paying improper attention to the
German governess, and—much like Jervis, who slanders Lester’s sister—
circulating about her “most wrongful and injurious reports for the purpose
of turning against her the current of public opinion.” Jarvis denied every-
thing and accused Sarah of insanity. The state legislature adjudged him not
guilty.

Even given the Jervis/Jarvis homonym, Jervis was just as likely to make
contemporary readers think of celebrity preacher John Maffitt. Born in Dub-
lin, Maffitt married, had three children, and worked as a tailor (a vocation
he would later try to deny) before separating from his wife and emigrating to
the United States in 1819. After affiliating with the New York Methodists, he
became an acclaimed yet always controversial evangelist. Scandal hit in 1822
when the New England Galaxy ran reports of his heavy drinking and inap-
propriate behavior with young women, charges he denounced as libel. His
case came before an ecclesiastical court, where he was charged with “1. False-
the altar 5. Loose, light, and lascivious conduct.” Or to be more precise, Maf-
fitt had supposedly recycled his sermons; professed that he did not believe in the Trinity; gossiped; “laughed in his sleeve” at an older man whom one of his sermons had moved to tears; drank too much; and, worst of all, flirted shamelessly with various women, including the three sisters of one of Maffitt’s chief accusers, Alexander Jones, Jr., when Maffitt was staying with the Jones family for a month. The court found Maffitt not guilty, while censuring him for “want of judgment and prudence.” Maffitt won the libel case. This trial seems to have inspired several aspects of Jervis, including his questionable sincerity, his smirking at penitent hearers after the sermon, and his predatory behavior with young women in families offering him hospitality. The Maffitt case may also have inspired Lippard to center a novel on a young man determined to defend a sister’s honor against a lecherous minister.

At the 1822 trial, Maffitt begged forgiveness and promised to be more “watchful and prudent” in the future, but this was easier said than done. Writing Memoirs in 1849, Lippard could draw not only on that early trial, whose accusations and counter-accusations lived on in pamphlet form, but also on Maffitt’s long, checkered history of preacherly triumph and private indiscretion. Maffitt had recovered from disgrace to become a nationally acclaimed revivalist in the late 1820s and 1830s, preaching in both rural and urban areas and drawing at times thousands of listeners. His preaching style was short on argument and long on rhetorical flourishes and vivid images, which one contemporary attributed to his “long course of novel-reading.” From fiction, supposedly, he crafted a style that dealt heavily in “jewels, stars, rainbows, and all that gaudy, glittering imagery, which constitutes the imaginative orator’s peculiar capital and stock in trade.” Maffitt’s fame, especially in the South and West, was such that he was selected chaplain to Congress in 1841 and, after his death in 1850, included in Presbyterian minister William Buell Sprague’s nine-volume compendium, Annals of the American Pulpit (1856–1869), designed to honor America’s best preachers from 1620 to 1855. Yet his relationships with women were a constant source of trouble. When his wife and three children eventually followed him from Ireland to the United States, they settled in New Orleans, then Galveston, while he continued to travel widely and, some claimed, tried to justify his separation from his wife by circulating slanderous reports about her. At the same time, critics accused him of attending far more to his female than to his male converts. The cloud over his personal life broke in 1847, when, during a period in which his wife died and he was preaching a series of sermons at a crowded church in Brooklyn, he decided to marry one of his auditors, whom he met for the first time at the mourners’ bench. She was the sixteen-year-old Frances, or “Fanny,” Smith, stepdaughter of Judge John Pierce of
Brooklyn. The age difference alone shocked many, and critics charged that he had preyed on the girl’s vanity and seduced her by getting her drunk. The marriage did not last. Maffitt was exasperated with his young wife’s lack of piety and fondness for dress and flirting; Fanny chafed under his heavy-handed rule and unflappable belief that he knew what was best for her. After a few months, Fanny was living in a boarding house and Maffitt was back on the road. Rumor had it that Maffitt had gone so far as to arrange for a friend and fellow pastor to seduce her, so that it might be easier to divorce her for infidelity, while Judge Pierce charged that Maffitt—“this infamous, lying, drunken villain”—was circulating stories that his daughter had already been pregnant with another man’s child when they married. The separation became final when after a brief reconciliation Fanny refused to obey Maffitt and returned home to her mother. She died of typhus not long after. This disastrous marriage damaged Maffitt’s reputation, as did further rumors of impropriety in the late 1840s, but he continued to lead revivals throughout the late 1840s. When he died suddenly in 1850, his defenders claimed that the many false accusations against him had literally broken his heart (they cited the coroner’s report); his critics alleged suicide or delirium tremens.

Maffitt’s sordid history was a goldmine for Lippard, and the many points of connection between Maffitt and Jervis render implausible Lippard’s claims that the novel indicted no one in particular. In the March 10, 1849 issue of the Quaker City weekly, Lippard noted that many readers had written in with guesses as to the “original” of Jervis and that the Western papers were identifying him with Maffitt. Lippard denied it outright: “Once for all, we must state this impression to be altogether erroneous. With Mr. Maffit [sic] we have nothing to do, either in the walks of literature, or in the walks of daily life. We do not attack persons.” These protests that, in effect, any resemblance to persons living or dead was entirely coincidental were most likely Lippard’s attempt to protect himself from a lawsuit—a smart move, given that in 1822 Maffitt had sued the New England Galaxy for libel and won. Despite this disclaimer, there is good reason to think that Lippard wrote more truly when he later claimed that the story “contained too much truth […] to be called a fiction” and was rather “a picture of real life.” Lippard had known about Maffitt since at least 1843, when as editor of the Citizen Soldier he had written a blurb referring to him as a “popular preacher” and seconding the New York papers’ critique of him as one who generated excitement but exercised little real influence. Jervis follows this model: besides also being a “Popular Preacher,” he is so indifferent to his hearers’ spiritual development that he leaves the church building soon after preaching, while the most distressed are still standing at the mourners’ bench. Further, many
of the details surrounding Jervis mirror the descriptions of, and accusations against, Maffitt. Jervis, too, is an eloquent, successful preacher from an indeterminate background who, in good Methodist fashion, vividly paints images of heaven and hell for audiences drawn from all classes of society. He also, like Maffitt, is a master of sexual impropriety who exploits his itinerant status to flirt with women, especially fashionable ones—Maffitt, one “Miss H.” in Nashville; Jervis, Sophia Snawlip—and smiles ambiguously as he moves among the penitent, as if he might be laughing at them, or flirting. Finally, he, too, tries to end a new marriage by spreading unsavory rumors about his wife; in both cases, the wife is soon dead. Lippard’s naming the object of Jervis’s intended seduction “Fanny” is another nod to the knowing reader.

In modeling Jervis on Maffitt, Lippard did more than simply make hay from scandal. He also intervened in the public debate surrounding Maffitt by telling a story that rebutted his defenders, in particular a lengthy pamphlet about his marriage, Moses Elsemore’s *An Impartial Account of the Life of the Rev. John N. Maffitt* (1848). The pamphlet, as the title suggests, adopted a tone of neutrality, celebrating Maffitt’s eloquence while also crediting the idea that he paid inappropriate attention to his female parishioners and conceding that he was partly to blame for his two unhappy marriages. After weighing the evidence of the minister’s defenders and detractors and reprinting letters from Frances Smith, Judge Pierce, and Maffitt himself, Elsemore concluded that the charges against Maffitt must be untrue because such a villain could not have gone unexposed while succeeding so brilliantly as a revivalist. In *Memoirs* Lippard demurred: public success did not preclude a preacher from performing so faultlessly that he duped even close observers. The novel makes this point when Lester, scrutinizing Jervis at the mourners’ bench after the sermon to determine whether or not the preacher is also his seducer’s sister, finds that he cannot plumb the man’s character and that the preacher seems completely sincere: “‘It cannot be the same!’ he murmured, gazing upon that Face, which was softened in every line by the impulse of deep religious feeling. ‘No! I am mistaken!’” And yet Jervis is the seducer Lester seeks. Beyond pointing up clerical hypocrisy, the scene acknowledges that preachers could be complex individuals with deep religious feelings and a history of immoral behavior—a nuanced point in a world that wanted to see religious devotion as intimately linked to moral action and ministers as either men of God or atheistic charlatans. Jervis warns readers to be on their guard against all preachers, no matter how religiously fervent.

The description of Jervis’s sermon that unfolds over several chapters early in *Memoirs* is surprisingly complex, far more so than the one in Pyne’s church. It shows Lippard wrestling with the phenomenon of popular, evan-
gelical preaching—disdaining it, envying it, and meditating on its shortcomings. Jervis, so far identified only as the Popular Preacher, delivers a spellbinding sermon on the apocalypse to a large, diverse, overflowing congregation at the fictional “St. Simon’s,” which the narrator insists should not be identified with any particular Philadelphia church. Young and old, rich and poor line the galleries, aisles, and windows, filling the church from the door to the pulpit steps. All strain to hear the preacher’s clear, musical voice. Though not a Millerite, Jervis is exploiting public anxiety about the end of the world by describing scenes of flames and final judgment, with heaven for the “Saved” and God’s vengeance for the “Lost,” a message the novel scorns as shameless fear-mongering. Those who throng to hear the sermon but cannot enter the church shove and shout, suggesting that any such sermons they have heard have done them little good. Heat and crowds make the air inside oppressive and “almost—pestilential,” a commentary less on the notorious difficulty of ventilating large urban churches than on the threatening sermon. Fear is the listeners’ dominant mood. Though at times their response defies description—“Words are vain to describe the effect of these words”—it is something like a vast, prolonged wailing, “as though a multitude were tossing in the ocean waves, and uttering their last cry ere they sank forever.” The metaphor gives an ominous spin to the rhetoric of the sublime associated with great preaching: the sermon is like a mighty wave, a force of nature, but able only to destroy, not uplift.91 The sermon assumes an even more sinister dimension when, a few chapters later, Jervis mesmerizes Fanny and another character, an incident implying that he, like Ravoni, uses his “magnetic” abilities to exercise a seductive power over listeners.

Yet even as the novel holds the sermon up for critique, the chapters in St. Simon’s suggest an envy of popular preaching by balancing satire with an admiration for the preacher’s ability to command his audience. The narrator lingers on the vast crowd drawn from all classes and on the pulpit’s immediate and extensive power: “Every soul hung on the Preacher’s voice. When his accents fell, you were appalled by the awful stillness of the place. When his voice arose in thunder tones, it was answered by an hundred others.” The people shriek, sob, moan, and shout for joy, and the preacher’s words are “printed on the hearts of thousands.” His voice moves even the most resistant hearers: Lester, having tracked down the preacher only to avenge his sister’s seduction, is swept up in the collective emotion and the images “of a calm bright world beyond the grave.” His heart melts, he sighs deeply, the tears roll down his cheeks. He shudders without knowing why.92 The extended sermon scene highlights the comparative advantages of preachers versus authors. Preachers address an audience that is real, tangible, seemingly unified, and
able to be immediately and visibly moved. The novelist puts mute words on a page and hopes to find an audience that is necessarily scattered, asynchronous, distractible, and openly critical.

While envying the preacher’s power, Lippard was unwilling to cede an inch of moral or theological ground to Jervis or the evangelical ministers he represented. Just as the veteran’s and narrator’s speeches counter Pyne’s preaching, so here two speakers promoting Lippard’s own views on Christian faith parry Jervis. The first is that of the ingenuous Fanny, who explains at the mourners’ bench that she has barely listened to the sermon because she was so worried about her dying mother (i.e., unbeknownst to her, her mother’s cousin). Her inattention makes the point that sermon-listening is less important than caring for the sick and dying or, by extension, any of the city’s suffering poor. Fanny answers Jervis’s question about whether she goes to church by saying that although she is usually too tired from working all week to attend on Sunday, she has often thought while sitting at home that “with all our wretchedness, we poor people are the very kind of people whom our Saviour came to make happier.” And when she has prayed while sewing, she has felt “a warm feelin’ here—here—as if the good Lord had spoken in his own way, even to me.”

Fanny articulates two of Lippard’s own religious principles: the radical message, associated with Philadelphia Universalism, that Jesus came primarily to be a comfort to the poor and the more traditional pietistic message, common to his German ancestors and the Methodism of his youth, that personal devotional feeling is the touchstone of true religion. The novel affirms the value of Fanny’s testimony when the eavesdropping Lester sheds a tear.

Then Lester, too, steps back and comments on the scene at St. Simon’s. More complex and intellectualized than Fanny’s naïve piety, Lester’s response suggests Lippard’s attempt to come to terms with the popularity of religious beliefs and practices he rejected. After Jervis leaves the building, Lester leans against the pulpit railing, dispirited and confused, incredulous that the preacher who has proclaimed the damnation of sinners so mercilessly could be the perjurer and murderer of his sister. He reflects that though some would find “food for mirth and derision” in the hell-fired theology and emotional displays, one cannot call a religion false for these reasons alone, or even because the minister is a hypocrite. He ponders, “Admitting that the Preacher is a sensualist and these manifestations of Religion are extravagant to the last degree, shall I therefore call this Religion a falsehood, the mode of worship an idle play, a hollow mockery? Not so—not so.” His meditation ends with the creedal proclamation (cited in part above), “I feel most vividly that that Form of Religion only is false which teaches one sect to deride
another, and with its dogmas buries and confounds that principle of Universal Brotherhood which flowed from the life of Christ himself.”

In naming sectarianism the cardinal sin and Universal Brotherhood the supreme virtue, the novel strikes a delicate balance, both critiquing organized religion and affirming the worth of the common people whose eagerness to hear preaching such as Jervis’s would seem to open them up to scorn.

At stake in this negotiation is democracy itself, as criticizing the public’s religious judgment calls into question the principle of self-government. If the people cannot be trusted to choose their religious leaders wisely, how can they be trusted to choose their political representatives? Lippard had largely ignored this issue with Pyne, whose church he had ridiculed even though it included “male and female, old and young, high and low, rich and poor.” There the spectacle of massed humanity is repulsive: the hearers are “packed together [. . .] like sardines in a tin box.”

Memoirs presents the array of classes and ages assembled to hear the preacher much more sympathetically: “Young and old, rich and poor, the fashionable and the rude laborer, the poor woman who sold vegetables in market, and the rich one who merely squandered her husband’s money—all were there, presenting contrasts vivid and innumerable.”

Lester’s creed echoes this more tolerant perspective by affirming that one of the benefits of religion is its ability to foster communal solidarity.

But then, as if impatient with attempting to make peace with popular preaching, Lippard jumps onto the page to defend the novel’s superiority to the sermon. It is one of those rare moments when the author rather than the narrator speaks in the middle of the story. After defending the notion that “mere worldlings” such as Lester could have genuine and worthwhile religious ideas, Lippard turned to his main point—that novelists have a religious vocation and might, in fact, do more good than ministers:

And even the Writer of Novels, who now sends these words to you, from his isolated room, may sometimes feel some impulses born of Eternity stirring within his bosom. Can you believe it? The pen which now writes, may do a braver, better work for Humanity, than the pen which merely writes a Sermon in defence of a mere creed, or turns ink to gall again, by putting down on pure white paper, some horrible Dogma of Theology, stolen from the cells of Heathen barbarity. Will you admit it?

[The Writer of Novels] thinks that the Novel which goes every where, and speaks to all hearts—speaks perchance to fifty thousand people at the same moment—may be made the instrument of that kind of Christianity which has only one word in its vocabulary—Brotherhood.
He thinks—this profane Writer of Novels, mark you—that he, even he, has a work to do in the world, and that his work is to speak the wrongs and the hopes of Humanity in the parables of Fiction.

And sometimes there comes a thought to him, that he is doing a better work by writing Novels, than he would be doing were he to put himself to making Sermons and tinkering Creeds. That the talent which is given him, is not given to be crushed. That when his pen no longer moves, and when the hand that grasps it has gone to dust—when his place in your streets is vacant, and his room no longer witnesses his lonely vigil—that even then the words which he has written may do a good work in some heart yet unborn; and that some humble soul, sitting down by the wayside of the world, may bless his memory—even his, the Writer of Novels.

And thus it is, my respectable scorner of Novel Writers, that the Novel Writer has something good in his heart, and something Divine in the impulse which guides his pen. 97

Here Lippard elevated both his message and his medium, advocating for a radical, Universalist-inspired version of Christianity against the orthodox preachers’ “heathen barbarity” and for the democracy and universality of the novel against the irrelevance and sectarianism of the sermon. Whereas a popular preacher might address thousands in a packed church, a novelist, even one who scribbled in obscurity, could speak to “fifty thousand” at once (more even than gathered to hear the legendary Whitefield) as well as to future generations, who would “bless his memory.” Nowhere was Lippard clearer that he wanted to see novelists triumph over ministers in American culture.

Lippard also made this point vividly in an editor’s column in the January 27, 1849, issue of the Quaker City weekly, the same issue that carried on its first page Chapter 16 of Memoirs, which describes the powerful effect of Jer-vis’s preaching on the gathered listeners. The column presented the author as a romantic artist whose work achieved far more than that of more prestigious men, especially ministers. It began by ironically conceding that the novelist’s tools—“a quire of writing paper, a bottle of ink, and a steel pen” (worth just thirty-seven cents, he says)—were nothing compared to a golden-hilted sword, a pocket full of bank notes, or a high pulpit decked out with velvet and gold fringe. The author takes up his tools alone in his narrow, dingy room on the city’s outskirts, a “hermit in a brick wilderness.” His only comfort is a novel he has written, which is no less than “his Soul bound up in a brown paper cover.” This novel tells stories of the rich few who oppress the many, of the millions who are cheated, starved, and hanged, and of such consola-
tions as the “divine tenderness of woman.” It reaches readers in all thirty states simultaneously: the mechanic in his New York garret, the traveler in the cabin of a Mississippi steamboat, the planter in his Virginia mansion, the forester by his watch-fire in the Maine snows. It soon crosses national boundaries. An American soldier in Mexico reads it out loud to his comrades. “[S]ixty thousand” English people read it. Translated, it travels across Europe: it is “a Pilgrim over all the Earth, free to wander from the hut to the Palace, and free to wander forever.” The preacher may “say the same things to a thousand people every Sunday in the year,” but the novel preaches a better message and reaches a far wider audience.98

Although Lippard championed novel-writing over preaching, he seems not to have been able to imagine the novel as morally authoritative without sermonic discourse. The narrator of Memoirs preaches less often than that of The Quaker City but more directly and at greater length. One chapter in particular carries a great deal of the novel’s didactic burden. When young Ralph climbs to the top of the half-constructed Girard College to elude the villains he fears are chasing him, the narrator turns to the reader and says, “Let us place the young outcast once more upon the marble roof, and listen to a Sermon preached by ‘a writer of immoral books.’” Readers are then told that if they are reading only for the plot, they can skip the next chapter, but if they “wish to hear a sermon, with Girard College for a pulpit,” they should read on. Lippard’s regular invocation of Girard College as a symbol of the oppression of the poor, especially in the name of religion, would have clued in many readers to the sermon’s probable message. In letting readers choose whether or not to read a sermon whose purport they can guess, Lippard sought to defuse potential resentment—and acknowledged that sermons and novels resisted mixing. The next chapter’s title, “A Sermon from the Top of Girard College, By ‘A Writer of Immoral Books,’” continues the polemic of Lippard’s earlier rant from “the Writer of Novels.”99

The unapologetically digressive Writer’s sermon offers a collective vision that compensates for the story’s focus on selfish, corrupt individuals. Like other reformist novelists of his day—Elizabeth Gaskell in Mary Barton (1845), for instance, or Charlotte Brontë in Shirley (1849)—Lippard struggled to adapt the novel to the representational demands of complex, systemic social and economic problems. When Goodleigh dies, one evil-doing capitalist has been punished, but the problem of capitalism remains untouched. When the virtuous characters are rewarded with land out West, the problems of urban tenancy are evaded. The Writer’s sermon, in contrast, foregrounds collectivities and institutions. Its first line, “Doth not a curse rest upon the Great City?” sets the tone. With variations on this question serving
as a refrain, the sermon first denounces a series of types whose behavior implicitly undermines the integrity of social institutions: the Unjust Judge, who punishes the poor more severely than the rich; the Editor, who corrupts public morals by running ads for abortifacients; and the Lawyer, who argues any case for gold. Then, more radically, the sermon critiques capitalism, echoing ideas that Lippard had advanced in his 1848 address to the Philadelphia convention of the Industrial Congress, a short-lived political organization that advocated land reform and the ten-hour day. The sermon decries “the universal fever for the fruits of labor, without labour’s [sic] honest work” and the “eternal combat, between man and man, between weak and strong, and all for the wages of the poor man’s toil.” It also suggests that a return to the land will help solve the problems of economic inequality. The Writer sets the cursed city against the mountain valley, “where the air of God is free,” and invokes the words of Thomas Jefferson, idolized as a truth-speaking “apostle of Humanity,” as a virtual scripture: “A GREAT CITY IS THE SORE OF THE BODY POLITIC.” Like all sermons, this one holds out hope, ending with a postmillennial vision of the new Jerusalem: “A GOLDEN CITY! Golden with brotherly love, golden with justice higher and deeper than ‘old English law; golden with impulses born of God, and working for the good, not of the greatest number, but of the whole number[!]” Whitmanesque in anticipating future readers, the Writer speculatesthat if this novel should “wander down the pathway of the next century, and encounter the eyes of 1949, how will the readers of that era, living amidst a redeemed civilization, wonder at the barbarous laws and fiendish theologies of the year 1849?” Here the Writer speaks as a preacher, not a politician, eschewing specifics about how humanity might go about achieving the harmonious new social order. Lippard’s address to the Industrial Congress in 1848 had been similarly vague. It maintained that someday every worker would live on his own land and that the nation would be free of capitalists and speculators, but did not delve into strategy: “Even while we may differ with regard to details, and hold various opinions as to the method of Progress, let us never, for an instant, cease to gird to our hearts the holy thought of ‘BROTHERHOOD.’”

The Writer’s sermon is the novel’s most fully articulated rejoinder to the Popular Preacher. It calls for collective salvation in this world rather than individual salvation for a few in the next, and it does so in a style as vivid and exclamatory as that of the era’s evangelical preachers. Most strikingly, the Writer takes readers on an aerial tour of the city and, with characteristic Lippardian voyeurism, shows them the city’s uncovered housetops. Like a Methodist preacher at a camp meeting, the Writer invokes supernatural beings to intensify his gloomy scenes, inviting readers to picture the “fiends
of darkness” who look on and laugh and the witnessing angels who cry tears of blood. He then describes scenes of urban misery and corruption with the melodramatic intensity evangelical preachers typically reserved for the crucifixion of Jesus and the agonies of the damned. The lonely widow starves “with her babe lying dead upon her breast,” bank directors plan their “legal robbery of the common people,” the “White Slave” toils at her needle, and a rich man’s son propositions an overworked seamstress, who in capitulating will cross “the line which divides Heaven and Hell.”

The Writer heaps especial scorn on a priest who, having just finished a powerful sermon against Catholics or perhaps French novels, glides home to his study to drink wine and write a sermon defending the riches of Trinity Church. The Writer exhorts the priest to look across eighteen hundred years to the Sea of Galilee, where “The Christ who has just been preaching to multitudes of the Poor, is now sitting in their midst, feeding these poor with actual bread!” Like a Methodist preacher describing the torments of hell and the ecstasies of heaven, the Writer contrasts the scenes of the city’s miseries with the vision of Jesus feeding the poor and the final promise of the “Golden City.”

Perhaps no antebellum author defended the moral value of fiction as vociferously as Lippard. Yet even as he extolled novelists in his editorial columns and made fiction the centerpiece of the Quaker City weekly, he seems to have grown impatient with stories as a vehicle for his social vision. In a column in the May 12, 1849 issue of the Quaker City, which carried that week’s installment of Memoirs on the front and back covers, he declared that “the only rule of literary composition worth minding” was the principle, “Have something to say, and say it with all your might.” He continued to write fiction, but his work in the late 1840s suggests he felt he could never speak mightily enough on paper. From his speaking engagement at Burr’s church in 1845 until his death in 1852, he lectured throughout the Eastern states building support for the Brotherhood of the Union. He conducted an especially robust public speaking program in 1848, when he addressed the Industrial Congress; ran for the office of district commissioner of Philadelphia, which he did not gain; and campaigned for presidential candidate Zachary Taylor. He was supposedly a remarkable speaker whose performances matched the energy of his print persona. He would, as his first biographer has it, begin a speech in a low monotone charged with “a quiver, a thrill, which shows you that the speaker feels what he says,” then step forward, raise his voice, and let loose a torrent of words. Fueled by righteous fervor, he gestured freely, “now raising one arm to heaven; now bringing down both hands at a time, as he emphatically denounces some giant wrong; now pointing the ‘slow finger of
unmoving scorn’ at some petty meanness; and now stamping his foot passionately.”

The novelist had become a preacher in the flesh.

Lippard also pressed beyond print in the last years of his brief life by founding and running the Brotherhood of the Union, a quasi-religious secret society dedicated to the unity of men of all classes and creeds who wanted to work toward the “harmonious” relationship of labor and capital, the equitable distribution of land, and the realization of America as the “Palestine of Redeemed Labor.” Inspired by the Odd Fellows and the Masons (to both of which organizations Lippard belonged), as well as by Rosicrucianism and the Bavarian Order of the Illuminati, the Brotherhood inducted members and ran meetings according to elaborate rituals designed by Lippard himself. With this organization, he sought to educate and uplift the laboring men who might not be reached by print or even speeches: “Many persons, who cannot receive ideas through the means of Books, or oral lessons, may be instructed by means of rites and symbols.” As a precursor to the Knights of Labor and several other labor societies after the Civil War, the Brotherhood may be Lippard’s most significant legacy.

Too often reduced to the sensationalism of The Quaker City, Lippard was a versatile author who in less than a dozen years crafted an extraordinary career as editor, writer, and political activist. Still haunting the borders of the canon, his fiction merits further attention for how it combines elements often considered incongruous—sensationalism and moral didacticism, sentimentalism and radical politics, working-class consciousness and Protestant faith. As I have tried to show, his work also throws into relief the tension between antebellum novelists and ministers, revealing how novelists resented fiction’s lowly status and the clergy’s complacent assumption of moral authority. In writing novels that slammed the clergy and preached politically radical sermons readers were unlikely to hear in church, Lippard claimed moral authority for fiction while promoting a new gospel centered on this-world redemption of the poor. The novelists discussed in subsequent chapters were seldom as vehement in their anticlericalism, but they, too, often sought to establish fiction’s moral authority through the two-pronged strategy of humiliating clerical characters and presenting moral visions in sermonic voice. In The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne would turn to both of these devices—though with an un-Lippardian smirk that mocked both the preachers and his own ambitions.