Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel

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CONCLUSION

The Lingering Rivalry

Exposing the Sermon’s Limitations in
William Dean Howells’s *The Minister’s Charge*

The sermon was both the centerpiece of Protestant worship in ante-bellum America and the culture’s paradigmatic voice of moral authority. Seeking to avoid the caricature of sermons as tedious and oppressive, I have tried to cast them in a more sympathetic light by showing how ministers worked to make them meaningful, powerful experiences for listeners, and how novelists, resentful and resistant, sought to usurp preacherly authority. The novelists’ tango with preaching cannot be reduced to the familiar tropes of subversion and irony. Translating the preacher to the page, they tempered critique with recognition, as both they and post-disestablishment ministers jockeyed for audiences’ attention and respect in a crowded public sphere where secular and religious concerns intermingled. Hypocritical and unjust preachers were ever ripe for satire, but novelists also found a tantalizing rhetorical model in the popular or beloved minister addressing a devoted congregation. Novels often register authors’ sense of disadvantage: though fiction promised broader distribution through space and time, it also lacked the imagined human presence of embodied performance, the sacred context of religious ritual, and the immediate gratifications of collective audience response. One of the primary ways novelists defied these limitations was through sermonic voice, which, in epitomizing the sermon’s rhetorical distinctiveness, carried a special weight for readers accustomed to listening to preaching with respect or even deference. Confronting preachers on their own stylistic ground, novelists challenged Protestant dogma by conveying
heterodox and challenging ideas with the sermon’s sanctioned moral and religious fervor.

Novelists’ usurpation of sermonic voice contributed to a process of secularization in which, as part of the differentiation of social subsystems endemic to modernity, literature developed autonomy from other institutions, religion above all. The years around 1850 represent something of a landmark in this process, as the clergy’s faltering responses to social crises, especially poverty and slavery, compromised their moral leadership and as Romanticism fueled the idea that literature—even the lowly novel—could edify the world at least as well as the religious authorities. Novelists writing at this juncture pushed back hard against the entrenched disdain for novels as timewasting and corrupting and, through their canny engagement with preaching, sought an equivalent moral and religious authority for their own cultural productions.

After the Civil War, Protestant preaching remained a major cultural presence. Despite any assumptions we might have that secularism became the new norm as a result of the biblical Higher Criticism, the growth of scientific knowledge, or skepticism born of increasing religious pluralism accelerated by waves of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, evidence suggests that postbellum Americans were as religious as ever, at least as measured by their religious belonging and affinity for sermons. Church membership rose from 34 percent of the population in 1850 to 45 percent in 1890, and the latter half of the century saw the heyday of such superstar preachers as Henry Ward Beecher at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, Phillips Brooks at Trinity Church in Boston, and the peripatetic, transatlantic Dwight L. Moody. Yet the clergy were losing their mystique. Karin Gedge, describing how postbellum newspaper cartoons represented inappropriate relationships between ministers and parishioners as a “farce rather than a mythic tragedy,” attributes the nation’s new comparative nonchalance toward clerical morality to the chastening effects of a brutal and devastating war that reframed what counted as a threat to the republic. Secularization, or the differentiation and autonomization of subsystems, also relativized the clergy’s claims. As professionals in a complex, modernizing world, ministerial foibles—or virtues—had repercussions for local networks but not, it seemed, for the nation as a whole.

Given the decline in ministers’ symbolic power, as well as the development and professionalization of the literary field, postbellum novelists were less invested than their predecessors in treating preachers as cultural competitors—less inclined, that is, to figure them as doubles or to mimic the sound of the sermon. Especially in the now-canonical novels of the period,
authors tended to ignore preachers, to relegate them to the sidelines, or to treat them as members of a distinct profession, to be described, like anyone, according to the psychologizing, contextualizing procedures of realism. Henry James, for instance, showed little interest in the American preacher unless regarded as a dyspeptic, handwringing nebbish (Babcock in *The American*) or, secularized, as a mesmerizing women’s rights speaker (Verena Tarrant in *The Bostonians*). A similar sense that ministers are little more than background noise marks the novels of Edith Wharton: in *The House of Mirth*, for example, the preacher is only a distant, unseen presence separated by a mile of park from Lily Bart, who, unable to reconcile herself to a life of dull propriety, never quite makes it to the service. And in perhaps the most thorough fictive ministerial portrait of the latter half of the nineteenth century, Harold Fredric’s *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, the Methodist minister Ware is a case study in provincial small-mindedness and romantic delusion, not a serious rival for the novelist. To be sure, a certain amount of rivalry persisted in postbellum fiction, particularly among writers with a theological or moral point to make—as in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s critique in *The Gates Ajar* of Mr. Bland’s arid sermons on the afterlife, or Mark Twain’s parody of a revival in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The antagonism between preaching and novels may have peaked around 1850, but it enjoyed a respectable afterlife.3

One of the most thoughtful sequels to the mid-century novelists’ rivalry with preachers is William Dean Howells’s *The Minister’s Charge* (1886), published the year after Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and featuring, like the earlier novel, the liberal minister David Sewell. In *The Minister’s Charge* Howells followed antebellum authors in dramatizing his authorial preoccupations through a preacher, while parting ways from his predecessors by showing less inclination to satirize or dethrone sermons than to demonstrate how they occupy a cultural function distinct from and lesser than that of novels—one that is less moral and less attuned to the complexity of human nature.

Relatively obscure, *The Minister’s Charge* requires a word of summary. In this story, Sewell serves as the reluctant and fretful mentor to a young transplant from the country, Lemuel Barker. The story’s precipitating event occurs when Sewell visits the country and insincerely praises Barker’s poetry. When the deluded poet writes to Sewell for help finding a publisher, then shows up on his doorstep a few weeks later, a discomfited Sewell discourages him and urges him to return to the country, but before Barker can catch the train home, the well-meaning lie that lured him to Boston becomes the story’s original sin. A nigh-farcical chain of disaster besets the hapless rube, who is
swindled by confidence men, falsely accused of purse-snatching, thrown in
the slammer, humiliated at trial, famished then sickened, and forced to spend
a night at a hostel for tramps. Seeing a report of Barker's trial in the paper, a
remorseful Sewell tracks down his would-be mentee but is dismayed to find
he cannot persuade him to return to the country. Barker insists on making
his way in Boston, which he manages to do with significant aid from Sewell.
He becomes a man-of-all-work for one of Sewell's friends, a hotel clerk (after
dropping Sewell's name), and a reader and companion to one of Sewell's
wealthy parishioners. This ambiguous social ascent—always a glorified ser-
vant, he never comes close to breaking into a profession—is stymied when he
decides that he is morally obliged to become engaged to a working-class girl,
Statira, whom he has strung along despite his slackening interest. Resigning
himself for her sake to a working-class life, he borrows money from Sewell
to become a streetcar conductor. A near-fatal accident on the first day is a
deus ex machina, succeeding where Sewell could not in sending Barker, after
a long convalescence, back to the country and, a coy final chapter implies,
eventually separating him for good from his inapt prospective mate. As other
readers have explained, the story is a realist check on the Horatio Alger myth
of the country boy making good in the city. 4

But this story is Sewell's no less than Barker's. About a third of the novel
is from the minister's perspective, including the first three chapters and the
last five, a bookending that encourages readers to identify with his upper-
middle-class moralizing. 5 Sewell's main problem in life, it seems, is what to
do about Barker. Having once spoken and regretted his false, hope-giving
words, he regards Barker's struggles in Boston as trials of conscience, a moral
burden reinforced when he sees Barker among the congregants at his weekly
sermons and when the young man seeks him out for pastoral counsel. Barker
comes to represent for Sewell an interlinked social and moral problem—the
seeming intransigence of class difference and the ethical relationship of the
higher classes to the lower. Sewell thus partakes of Howells's own moral con-
cerns about social injustice and class inequity during this period. Further,
Howells uses the minister's perplexity in the face of Barker—his difficulty
communicating with him and his uncertainty about how to help him—to
represent the difficulty of escaping one's own class-based prejudices and
sympathies, along with the need to try to do precisely that. 6

As Sewell struggles to make sense of Barker and the lower classes
through his professional roles as preacher and counselor, what the novel
suggests, strangely enough, is that preaching is more effective than counsel-
ing. Although Sewell sees his pastoral interviews as central to his work ("He
found it necessary to do his work largely in a personal way, by meeting and
talking with people”), it is nearly impossible for him to do this work well. Not only is he no natural—with Barker, for instance, he is, despite his best intentions, alternately rambling and tongue-tied, solicitous and annoyed—but, more importantly, he can never know a situation well enough, or be sure enough which principles to apply to a given situation, to offer guidance that is anything more than a shot in the dark. Thus, when he guesses correctly Barker’s romantic problems and gives him the reasonable advice to avoid entangling himself with a woman who will hold him back intellectually and socially, the narrator makes clear afterward that for Barker to follow Sewell’s counsel would be a violation of conscience—a denial of “the gleam that lights up every labyrinth where our feet wander and stumble.” To Barker this light reveals that turning his back on Statira out of a desire for self-improvement would be a “real cruelty.” That Barker’s mother has expressed sentiments similar to Sewell’s suggests that the error of false guidance is not unique to the ministerial profession but endemic to well-meaning attempts to direct someone else’s life where complex moral questions are concerned. As Sewell exclaims in frustration after Barker first shows up in Boston, “Every one of us dwells in an impenetrable solitude! We understand each other a little if our circumstances are similar, but if they are different all our words leave us dumb and unintelligible.” More than a confession of Sewell’s own shortcomings, this declaration sets forth principles central to the realist novel’s disruption of romantic notions of sympathetic identification and transparent interpersonal communication.

Whereas *The Minister’s Charge* represents pastoral counsel as often leaving individuals more troubled and confused than it found them, an unintended consequence of its presumptions to intimacy, the novel holds up preaching as surprisingly meaningful and effective. Sewell is no superstar, but his liberal sermons on ethics attract a congregation of two or three hundred Bostonians of various classes. The perceptive art student Jessie Carver explains his appeal: “There’s something about him—I don’t know what—that doesn’t leave you feeling how bad you are, but makes you want to be better. He helps you so; and he’s so clear. And he shows that he’s had all the mean and silly thoughts you have. I don’t know—it’s as if he were talking for each person alone.” Her praise catalogs Sewell’s liberal virtues: he inspires moral improvement, avoids obscure theological language, and emphasizes his commonality with his parishioners. Plus, his sermons have the effect of individual address, an idea introduced early in the novel when Sewell’s friend Miss Vane says after a sermon, “I never have been all but named in church before [. . . ] and I’ve heard others say the same.” Sewell’s preaching, then, has the effect of intimate counsel yet is unencumbered with the unreasonable expec-
tations that come with one-on-one pastoral conversations. Sermons can be effective because of their impersonality. The moral application is left up to the listener, who may feel hailed but who does not bear the burden of having been personally told what to do.¹³

Much like *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Minister’s Charge* locates the secret spring of successful preaching in ministerial authenticity—not sincerity, or the coincidence of belief and action, but authenticity as the bringing to light of the speaker’s inarticulate emotional complexity. Dimmesdale taps this authenticity when he plumbs his shame and pain; Sewell, as he confronts his guilt in misleading Barker and struggles to understand his obligation to him. Like Dimmesdale, Sewell preaches well-received sermons fueled by moral conflict. The first, on “affectionate sincerity,” or the necessity of speaking even painful truths, results from the guilt he feels upon receiving Barker’s letter requesting help publishing his poems—guilt all the more potent for being hidden, as Sewell has avoided mentioning the letter to his wife. Once Barker starts attending regularly, Sewell gains power from seeing him in the congregation each week. Barker, in effect, gives the minister access to his own otherwise inaccessible depths. When Miss Vane tells Sewell that he seems to look at nobody else during the sermon, he exclaims, “I know it! Since he began to come, I can’t keep my eyes off him. I do deliver my sermons at him. I believe I write them at him! He has an eye of terrible and exacting truth. I feel myself on trial before him.”¹⁴ In a twist that reflects the liberal devaluation of ministerial authority, the idealized relationship of preacher and listener is reversed, as the minister quails with conviction under the parishioner’s gaze. The effect of Barker on Sewell is nearly magical: when the young man’s own mind wanders during the sermon, or when he is not in church, Sewell founders. But Sewell’s sermons also seem to hit the mark; Barker reportedly regards Sewell “as a channel of truth.”¹⁵

Yet *The Minister’s Charge* highlights the limitations of even well-meaning liberal preaching by presenting Sewell’s sermons as overly idealistic and individualistic, faults not unique to Sewell but typical of the sermon as a genre, centered as it is on moral abstraction and produced by men “of cloistered lives” whose theories outrun their facts.¹⁶ The novel critiques all of the sermons it describes in detail. After the first, on “affectionate sincerity,” Miss Vane shows up at the Sewells’ dinner table and, with a twinkle in her eye, exposes the sermon’s impracticality by disdaining their spread; she explains that in the spirit of her host’s recent sermon she can do no less. Miss Vane’s raillery also exposes the sermon’s triviality, as she says that she will also stop swearing and stealing her friends’ spoons when she hears these other “little sins denounced from the pulpit.”¹⁷ Soon the story, too, reveals the limited
moral scope of Sewell's preaching. The sermon on the text “The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel” (Prov. 12:10) focuses only on the cruel “tender mercies” of speech, avoiding a more challenging critique of action, especially social action. The novel, in contrast, takes up this issue by implying that the generosity on offer in the baths, beds, and hot meals at the Wayfarer’s Lodge might encourage men to loaf and turn to crime. The prime evidence for the latter possibility is the lay-about Williams, a Lodge regular eventually exposed as an unreformed thief. One need not share the novel’s skepticism about aiding the poor to see that the story offers a more far-reaching meditation on “The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.”

The moral limitations of Sewell’s preaching are even more evident in a subsequent sermon on “effort in the erring” (inspired, once again, by interactions with Barker), on how those who have done harm to another must strive for reparation. Sewell suggests that insofar as a sinner lives in anguish, trying to correct the wrong he has done someone else, sin might be “not wholly an evil.” The speciousness of Sewell’s moral reasoning becomes clear when the novel’s paraphrase of the sermon ends “His text was ‘Cease to do evil.’” The verse’s brevity and clarity drive home the irony that Sewell has done his convoluted best to deny the significance of evil by shifting the emphasis from not doing wrong to comforting his parishioners for sins already committed. This consolatory sermon may be just the sort Carver likes because it “doesn’t leave you feeling how bad you are,” but in the disjunction between verse and application, and in Sewell’s obvious desire to assuage his own guilt, the novel critiques the liberal sermon for a tendency to protect parishioners’ self-regard. Like Hawthorne, Howells eschewed Calvinism yet saw the moral downside of the liberal disinclination to reckon with the human capacity for wrongdoing.

As in The Scarlet Letter, The Minister’s Charge climaxes in a sermon. It is a capstone to Sewell’s attempts to translate moral perplexity into usable truth. And it does offer such a truth, or something like. The gist of the sermon, titled “Complicity,” is two-fold, though Sewell is too modern a preacher to lay out his points under separate heads. The first is an appeal to human unity: “no one for good or for evil, for sorrow or joy, for sickness or health, stood apart from his fellows, but each was bound to the highest and the lowest by ties that centered in the hand of God. No man, he said, sinned or suffered to himself alone; his error and his pain darkened and afflicted men who never heard of his name.” It is a reminder of human connection that minglesthe sobriety of John Donne’s Meditation 17 (“No Man is an Island”) with an Ishmaelian exultation in democratic oneness and George Eliot’s sense of sin’s far-reaching consequences. The minister’s second and more self-serving
point is that only those who have the “care of others laid upon them”—say, those like the minister with a “charge”—and who rejoice in their burden will realize the spiritual unity of humanity. Sewell declares that those who care for the “wretched, the foolish, the ignorant” will find them to be “messengers of God.” The sermon’s closing idea summons the shade of W. E. Channing in glorifying the person who cares for others: “In his responsibility for his weaker brethren he was Godlike, for God was but the impersonation of loving responsibility, of infinite and never-ceasing care for us all.” Sewell’s discourse is the quintessential nineteenth-century liberal sermon—idealistic, fervent, lyrical, and vaguely socially responsible. Its effect is the late nineteenth-century equivalent of the awed tumult following Dimmesdale’s Election Sermon. It is reported in the newspapers, reprinted as a pamphlet, and commented on in newspapers as far away as Chicago, and it strikes “one of those popular moods of intelligent sympathy” when it is misconstrued as a veiled commentary on the telegraphers’ strike. Besides marking a high point in Sewell’s career, the sermon’s reception, fictive as it is, suggests the cultural impact that a sermon could still have in the late nineteenth century.

The point I would like to stress about “Complicity,” as the final sermon in both The Minister’s Charge and in my attempt to trace how American novels positioned themselves with respect to preaching, is that it enacts a delicate negotiation that gives the sermon its due while denying it authority. Sewell’s message is not without merit, especially considering Howells’s desire for fiction, as Melanie Dawson writes, “to facilitate the type of cross-class sympathy necessary for the nation’s very stability.” The sermon calls for just these sympathies in its appeals to human unity and its exhortation that listeners should care for their “weaker brethren.” Indeed, the mandate to take responsibility for the less fortunate is supported at Barker’s own moral decision point, when he realizes that he should offer to marry Statira. To a certain extent, then, the novel allows Sewell’s sermon to stand—to provide an answer, for readers eager for such an answer, to the novel’s central problem of sympathizing with the lower classes. As Paul Petrie has pointed out, the “charge” of the novel’s title refers not only to Barker, as a person entrusted to the minister’s care, but also to this final sermon, as the minister’s injunction to his parishioners—and through them, one might add, to the novel’s readers.

Yet like American novels of a previous generation, The Minister’s Charge undermines the sermon and asserts the novel’s moral superiority. It suggests that even a sermon with a worthwhile ethical point pulls its punches. When Sewell’s friend, the newspaper editor Evans, proposes that Sewell preach a sermon on “Complicity,” he explains that the idea grows out of his frustration
with “the infernal ease of mind in which men remain concerning their share in the social evil—,” a sentiment Sewell interrupts with “Ah, my dear friend, you can’t expect me to consider that in my pulpit!” And, indeed, he does not. His sermon on this topic says not a word about “social evil” or individual moral complacency in the face of it. In fact, the title “Complicity” is an odd fit for Sewell’s sermon, which says nothing of shared guilt and would be better titled “Unity” or “Charity.” Although Sewell is presented as unconcerned with fame, his eventual decision to preach a sermon with a tantalizing title yet skirt its painful or indecorous associations hints at how a preacher, like a newspaper editor, might aim to “make talk.” The moral evasion represented in Sewell’s sermon is perhaps most evident in the text Sewell chooses, which, again, Howells deploys ironically: “Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them.” A touchstone verse for the antislavery movement, this text would seem to demand a pointed social application that Sewell does not provide, an omission implying a parallel between the antebellum ministers who dared not protest slavery and their late-nineteenth-century successors who, reluctant to attend their parishioners, avoided preaching on the problems of urban poverty. This critique of pulpit cowardice adumbrates Howells’s declaration of frustration in “Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading” (1899): “Let all the hidden things be brought into the sun, and let every day be the day of judgment. If the sermon cannot any longer serve this end, let the novel do it.” While rejecting obvious didacticism, Howells called upon the novel to fulfill the sermon’s traditional role of exposing sin, or error, and creating moral conviction.

If the novel implies that Sewell’s sermon is not hard-hitting enough, it also, ironically, undercuts its moral idealism about interpersonal relationships. A final chapter hints at the legitimate pleasure that might come from escaping the sermon’s demands—from being relieved of “loving responsibility” for one’s “weaker brethren.” When the narrator implies that Barker and Statira’s engagement dissolves and that Barker eventually enjoys a marriage “which was not only happiness for those it joined, but whatever is worthier and better in life than happiness,” it is a turn of events that undercuts the sermon in at least two ways. One, the vagueness of “whatever is worthier and better in life than happiness” suggests the fungibility of blessedness. Whereas the sermon teaches that fulfilling one’s duty to others constitutes “a privilege, a joy, a heavenly rapture,” the novel implies that it is of little import whether Barker and his future wife find fulfillment in caring for the downtrodden or in some other honorable, undefined way. Two, the patent improbability of the romantic resolution—that Barker is not obliged to marry Statira because her devotion has been all along an illusion born of her friend’s romantic
notions—is an obvious sop to readers that seems designed to jolt them into recognizing, from their own relief at Barker’s escape, that a life of noble self-sacrifice, however idealized in sermons, is an unappealing prospect. The implicit message is that the fine words of a sermon can offer only partial truths—and perhaps not those that lead us to our happiest lives.

In assessing the competition between novelists and preachers for moral authority, one might well ask who won. From the vantage-place of the literature classroom, the novel can easily seem the victor. We assign *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (and credit it for starting the Civil War and ending slavery) and *Moby-Dick*, but not the sermons of Henry Ward Beecher or Henry Bellows; *Clotel*, but not the ministers whose sermons it cannibalizes. Novels have inspired ample scholarship; sermons, little. But when we step outside the academic enclave, the balance of power is harder to discern. Then my years of listening to Schuller and Warren look at least as representative of American cultural life as my years of reading novels. In a recent Pew survey, just over half of respondents self-identified with a religious tradition that can be classified as Protestant, and at least 76 percent of those who attend Protestant churches attended at least a few times a year. All these attenders, we can assume, heard some form of sermon at each service. By way of comparison, a recent National Endowment for the Arts survey shows that only 50.2 percent of adult Americans reported having read a short story, play, poem or novel in the previous year. Though more suggestive than revelatory, such quantitative measures of the relative strength of the sermon and the novel must check any sense of the novel’s unmitigated triumph. One might also trace the persistent cultural power of preaching and the novel in other, more qualitative ways—in, for instance, the sermonic rhetoric of political oratory, or in the novelistic narrative structures that shape biography and other nonfiction genres. However one attempts to grasp the relative influence of preaching and the novel, it becomes clear that although these two cultural forms continue to borrow from each other, they are now recognized as belonging to distinct cultural realms, each with its own set of rules. The nineteenth-century novelists’ expectation that literature might displace religion now seems not merely like wishful thinking, but like a misapprehension of the emerging forms of modern life, in which the processes of cultural fragmentation push religion and literature ever further apart. Despite Whitman’s prophecy, “The priest departs, the divine literatus comes,” it turns out that priests and literati of all stripes, the latter seldom hailed as divine, have continued to flourish alongside one another.