



The Vital Landscape: Evangelical Religious Practice and the Culture of Nature in America, 1790-1870

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**The Vital Landscape: Evangelical Religious Practice and
the Culture of Nature in America, 1790–1870**

A dissertation presented

by

Brett Malcolm Grainger

to

The Faculty of Harvard Divinity School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Theology

in the Subject of

History of Christianity

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

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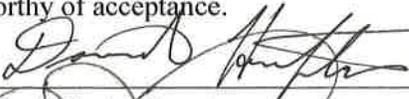
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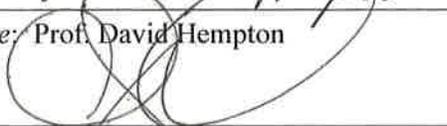
*The Vital Landscape: Evangelical Religious
Practice and the Culture of Nature in America, 1790-1870*

presented by Brett Malcolm Grainger

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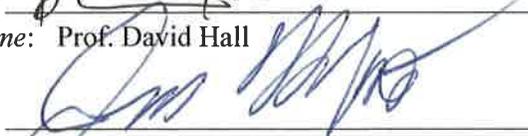
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“The Vital Landscape: Evangelical Religious Practice and
the Culture of Nature in America, 1790–1870”

Evangelicalism, historians have long noted, was a movement born in field, forest, and stream. Like most truisms, however, this one has rarely been explored as deeply as it deserves. Using the tools of cultural history, this dissertation explores the variety of ways in which antebellum evangelicals engaged, enlisted, and resisted the spiritual potential of the natural world in order to progress in the religious life. By examining practices as diverse as camp meetings, outdoor baptism, contemplation of the book of nature, water-cure, electrotherapy, and mesmerism, it retrieves and interprets some of the broader contours and tensions within these traditions of evangelical “nature piety.” One goal of this project, therefore, is to open up the natural world to scholars as an important site and source for evangelical religious experience in the antebellum period. Another is to contextualize these attitudes. Previous scholarship has assumed evangelical disinterest in nature or else read rising interest in the natural world as inherently corrosive to orthodoxy. However, while evangelical interest in the spiritual potential of nature paralleled that of Romantics and Transcendentalists, it had different origins and aims. Situating forms of evangelical nature piety within late medieval and early modern debates concerning primitivism, the spiritual senses, and mysticism, including notions of divine ascent and union with Christ, the project demonstrates how “vital piety,” the end of all evangelical effort, fed and flowed from a special sense of nature as enlivened by the presence of Christ. Proceeding thematically and chronologically, it tracks practices associated with progressive stages in the spiritual life, moving from the new birth (conversion) to the new life (sanctification), culminating in speculative investigations into

the nature of the new earth (eschatology). Such a structure underscores the limitations of secularization narratives, which have long presented the nineteenth-century turn to nature as a Trojan horse of heresy. The dissertation reveals a more complicated story. While antebellum evangelicals rhetorically distanced themselves from “superstitious” and “idolatrous” forms of nature worship, in daily life they actively engaged a vitalist view of nature as part of larger efforts to reform and renew orthodox patterns of belief and behavior.

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Introduction

In June 1827, Hannah Syng Bunting left New York City and crossed the Hudson River on her way to a camp meeting in Belleville, New Jersey. Impressed by the scenery Bunting, a Methodist and early Sunday school teacher, wrote in her journal that she had “never witnessed so commanding a prospect.” Arriving on the other side, the verdant landscape put her in mind of another prospect:

The road on one side was skirted by rocks and hills almost perpendicular, ornamented by moss and wild flowers; on our left were meadows of such rich verdure as reminded me of those ‘fields which stand dressed in *living green*.’ In that blessed region is a cloudless sky, a never setting sun; and by faith’s far reaching eye I almost saw the fount of life, and heard the music of the blessed circling the throne of the Eternal.¹

Bunting’s momentary glimpse of heaven in a stretch of meadow on the western shore of the Hudson recalls one of the most popular visualizations of heaven in nineteenth-century American song. “Sweet Prospect” was first published in 1835 in *The Southern Harmony, and Musical Companion*, a shape-note hymn and tune book compiled by William Walker, a Baptist song leader from Spartanburg, South Carolina. Commonly sung at revivals and riverside baptisms, the hymn encouraged believers to visualize the soul’s final journey to heaven, a spiritual translation described figuratively as crossing the Jordan River into Canaan.

On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye,
To Canaan’s fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.

O the transporting, rapturous scene,
That rises to my sight,

¹ T. Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Miss Hannah Syng Bunting*, 2 vols. (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, for the Sunday school union of the Methodist Episcopal church, 1837), I: 123.

Sweet fields array'd in living green,
And rivers of delight.²

Walker's hymn and Bunting's reflection offer helpful sightlines onto the landscape of antebellum piety, north and south. In each case, contemplation of a natural setting facilitated an act of spiritual sight or vision, a moment of transport or rapture in which the soul perceived spiritual truth in and through the physical creation. In contrast to Romantic or Transcendentalist modes of spiritual vision, which tended to collapse nature and supernature into a single plane, evangelical forms of nature piety preserved the distinction between God and the creation. Yet, distinction did not equal disinterest. Bunting and Walker alike regarded nature as a source of spiritual revelation nearly equal to scripture. By reading the creation as a book of divine symbols, types, or analogical correspondences, believers discerned not only evidences of God's existence but a means to attaining experience of and even closer union with the person of Christ, the life in the "living green." Early evangelicals frequently located the key to such a system in the writings of Paul. Paraphrasing Romans 1:20, the Methodist leader John Fletcher wrote, "the invisible things of God are clearly seen by the things which he has made,' that is by the visible creation. And [Paul] gives the reason...when he declares, 'that the things on earth are copies of those in heaven.'" Fletcher called such a system "evangelical mysticism."³

² William Walker, *The Southern Harmony, and Musical Companion* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 137.

³ John Fletcher, "On Evangelical Mysticism," in John Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 4 vols. (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1833), 4: 12. Leigh Schmidt has noted Fletcher's support for "gospel mysticism," a transformed mode of perception in which the saint saw the "invisible and spiritual" within things "gross and material." Schmidt writes, "The natural world, like Scripture itself, was filled with hidden spiritual correspondences, and the reborn Christian lived in a world alive with poetic subtlety,

This dissertation, “The Vital Landscape: Evangelical Religious Practice and the Culture of Nature in America, 1790–1870,” attempts to retrieve the broad contours of what I call nature piety. An eclectic and unsystematic set of traditions, it includes practices such as field preaching and camp meetings, outdoor baptism, the contemplative study of nature, and alternative healing techniques such as “water cure,” electrotherapy, and mesmerism.⁴ The origins, features, and significance of these traditions of nature piety have yet to be fully identified and incorporated into scholarly narratives of nineteenth-century American religion. Evangelicalism, historians have long noted, was a movement born in field, forest, and stream. From the woodland revivals that broke out in 1730 among persecuted Protestants in Salzburg to the great camp meetings of antebellum Kentucky, evangelical belief and practice were forged in close connection with the world of nature. Like most truisms, however, this one has rarely been explored as deeply as it deserves. Intellectual historians have parsed the place of nature in the writings of Protestant elites, especially theologians and natural philosophers, while historians of science have scrutinized evangelical reactions to developments in scientific knowledge

symbolism, and grace.” As far as I am aware, aside from Schmidt’s work, this dissertation is the first to employ the category as a distinctive mark of evangelical piety. Leigh E. Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality, From Emerson to Oprah* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 42.

⁴ I approach mysticism not as an essentialist category but as a culturally and historically constructed set of practices that may persist even in periods and traditions in which the term itself has come under attack or fallen out of use. See Amy Hollywood, “Introduction,” in Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 31–2. See also chapter two, n. 13, for a fuller discussion of the historiographical treatment of mysticism in American religious history.

(especially geology and biology).⁵ But few studies have attempted to comprehend and situate more-pervasive cultural attitudes to nature within the everyday “thought world” or mentalities of evangelicals in pew and pulpit.

Employing the tools of cultural history, this dissertation attempts to retrieve, contextualize, and interpret some of the broader contours and tensions within evangelical traditions of nature piety. The dissertation contends that early evangelicals pursued contact with divine forces in the natural environment in ways that stirred delight as well as fear, and created consensus as well as controversy. Through a range of practices relating to the “new birth” or conversion and the “new life,” the post-conversion walk of faith in which the believer sought a greater share of personal holiness, evangelicals pursued vital piety through immersion in a natural world animated by a sense of powerful spiritual presence. Layering forests, hills, rivers, and other sites with allusions to biblical holy spaces, believers created a sacred landscape that opened pathways to personal and corporate transformation.

It was a common belief among evangelicals in the early republic that they were participating in the restoration of the true, primitive piety of nature, the original form of

⁵ While the dissertation attends to scientific developments and their influence on broader attitudes to the natural world, it is not intended primarily as a history of science in antebellum society. For recent work on evangelical attitudes to science, see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); Herbert Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America, 1800–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978); Jon H. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). For a suggestive attempt to track the influence of scientific ideas on common people, see Ronald L. Numbers, “Science and Christianity among the People: A Vulgar History,” in Numbers, *Science and Christianity in Pulpit and Pew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11–38.

worship celebrated by Adam in the Garden of Eden. Lost or corrupted soon after the fall, this primitive worship had been preserved in pockets of the true church. Only with the appearance of widespread revivals of religion in the eighteenth century, they believed, had it once again become the rule rather than the exception for large numbers of Christians. Eclectic and unsystematic, practices of nature piety engaged the pursuit of spiritual purity as well as the health and healing of the physical body. Predominantly practical in bent, in some cases nature piety encouraged more-speculative attempts to map the deep cosmological structures of space and time and their future iteration in the “new earth” and the spiritual bodies of its occupants.

While practices of nature piety excited evangelicals for their potential to incorporate the believer more deeply into the life of Christ, they also awakened deep-seated fears, most pressingly the ancient specters of superstition and idolatry. Doubt and anxiety, as much as hope and excitement, characterized evangelical engagement with the natural world. The similarities between evangelical practices that recognized divine immanence in the works of nature and the forbidden worship of the creation left room for uncertainty. Evangelicals were called on by opponents of revivalism to articulate how their camp meeting practices differed from the grove worship that featured so prominently in the Canaanite cults described in the Old Testament. Believers similarly sought to distinguish their patterns of pilgrimage to mineral springs and water-cure facilities from Roman Catholic traditions involving holy wells and grottoes. Evangelical habits of meditation and contemplation on the book of nature, which affirmed the presence of God’s glory in every star, leaf, and blade of grass, required believers to defend themselves against charges of pantheism and quietism and to rearticulate the theological tension between immanence and transcendence in ways that set them apart from the

animistic cosmologies of Native American religions and from Romantic and Transcendentalist modes of pantheism. Those who engaged in the manipulation of “subtle” (weightless) ethers through practices such as animal magnetism and spiritualism were similarly forced to defend themselves against the charges that they were resorting to satanic agency.

Undergirding much of these traditions of nature piety was a belief in vitalism. Denoting a cosmological stance rooted in but extending beyond Hermetic, Cabbalistic, and Neoplatonic traditions, vitalism posits a “life force” or hidden “spark” divine in origin and present in all matter, with the power to renew and restore.⁶ In using the word, I invoke W. R. Ward’s suggestion that vitalism constituted an important component of the thought-world of early evangelicalism.⁷ Ward was one of the first scholars to argue that vitalism, traditionally associated with heterodoxical religious movements, constituted an important element of early evangelical culture. By embracing a vitalist cosmology,

⁶ Until recently, vitalism has interested mainly historians of science, who have sought to recover its influence on Enlightenment debates in the life sciences. Such works have focused on the European context. See Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). For the role of vitalism in the Puritan era, see John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); P. M. Harman, *The Culture of Nature in Britain, 1680–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), esp. ch. 8. The current work attempts to bring consideration of vitalism into discussions of American religious history and evangelicalism specifically.

⁷ W. R. Ward, *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670–1787* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Boyd Hilton makes a related point when he states that evangelical “vital religion” in the early nineteenth century was “the counterpart of vitalism in physiology, to catastrophism in geology, and to mechanistic dualism in natural philosophy generally.” See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 300. My own essay, “Vital Nature and Vital Piety: Johann Arndt and the Evangelical Vitalism of Cotton Mather,” *Church History* 81:4 (December 2012), 852–872, argues that Arndt’s *True Christianity* guided the appropriation of hermetic ideas in the natural philosophy of Cotton Mather, a pivotal link between evangelicalism and Puritanism.

evangelicals found a pragmatic middle path between “false” forms of enchantment (pantheism, animism) and disenchantment (deism, materialism). In journals, hymns, poems, and other cultural materials, evangelicals affirmed that the proper end of nature piety was closer union with Christ. Ward argued that the influence of vitalism declined in the nineteenth century, without demonstrating how or under what circumstances this purported decline occurred. This dissertation departs from Ward in demonstrating how a vitalist sensibility to the natural world was retained, resisted, and renegotiated by evangelicals in the variegated forms of heart religion that swept across the New World, from Virginia, Kentucky, and Appalachia to Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and the “burned-over district” of upstate New York.

If vitalism has been an understudied element in the thought-world of early evangelicals, natural theology has been the subject of sustained interest and analysis.⁸ Evangelicals were avid producers and consumers of natural theology, a genre of apologetics that seeks to reconcile the testimonies of God’s “two books,” scripture and nature, by furnishing proof of God’s existence and attributes from an examination of the natural world. For evangelicals, however, natural theology blended two voices or languages: a public language of evidentiary proofs and a private language of experimental

⁸ On evangelicals and natural theology, see John H. Brooke, “The History of Science and Religion: Some Evangelical Dimensions,” in David Livingstone et al., eds., *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); John H. Brooke, “Like Minds: The God of Hugh Miller,” in Michael Shortland, ed., *Hugh Miller and the Controversies of Victorian Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Aileen Fyfe, *Science and Salvation: Evangelical Popular Science Publishing in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); William J. Astore, *Observing God: Thomas Dick, Evangelicalism, and Popular Science in Victorian Britain and America* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2001), ch. 2. On American developments, see Ronald L. Numbers, “Reading the Book of Nature Through American Lenses,” in Numbers, *Science and Christianity in Pulpit and Pew*, 59–72; Herbert Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America, 1800–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978).

piety. The latter amounted to a method of holy living, one that incorporated the devotional themes and methods of English Puritanism and Lutheran Pietism with new Enlightenment practices of direct observation of the natural world. The current study expands the genre of natural theology from formal theological texts to include a broader array of cultural materials, including diaries, letters, poetry, hymns, lithographs, and religious practice. Consideration of such materials reveals a devotional tradition whose ambitions were framed not simply by defensiveness to scientific culture but also by optimistic hopes for personal and social transformation. These hopes were rooted in ancient theological debates over divine ascent and the spiritual senses going back to the writings of Origen. In contrast to the common senses on which scientific effort relied, to see and know Christ in the natural world required spiritual senses available only to the converted. Vital piety, the primary aim of evangelical effort, fed and flowed from a vital sense of the creation as enlivened by divine presence.

My interest in vitalism animates a number of questions that underlie this research. For instance, how did evangelicals negotiate a series of tensions, dating back to the Reformation: between a Protestant iconoclasm working to desanctify the landscape by cleansing it of idols and a countervailing impulse to hallow places sanctified by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the gathered body of Christ; between the providential-instrumentalist views of nature associated with Reformed theology and the quasi-pantheist sacramentalism of Lutheran Pietism; between localized and universalized notions of sacred space; and between notions of divine transcendence and immanence. How did evangelicals respond to the works of deists such as Alexander Pope and Erasmus Darwin, many of which were popular among many evangelicals but which expressed a

vitalist sensibility at odds with conventional orthodoxy? What were the limits of cultural appropriation and combination?

While the dissertation attends primarily to developments in the United States, it is sensitive to the influence of transatlantic and global currents. As historians have demonstrated over the last quarter-century, revivalism was not indigenous to the American frontier but was reimported from the spiritual hothouses of Europe, notably the Pietist missionary center of Halle, Saxony. Inspired by the mystical maxims of Johann Arndt's *True Christianity* (1606), early evangelical leaders picked over the corpus of Renaissance hermeticism, dabbled in Cabbala, and ransacked the great spiritual works of the late medieval church and early modern Catholicism. This method of combining disparate strands of doctrine and practice, described by Arndt as *colligere* ("to read together"), suggests a spiritual eclecticism that I consider a defining feature of evangelical cultural practice, one that, this dissertation argues, both anticipates and critiques Catherine Albanese's notion of combinativeness in religious traditions.⁹ Within the framework of cultural appropriation suggested by Albanese, there are no definable limits to what practices or ideas may be combined. All individuals, however, are born into a particular time and place. That social and cultural location provides the intellectual horizons that frame and limit the imaginable and the possible. Arndtian *colligere* operated within a framework of Lutheran theology, which regarded scripture as the test of what may be profitably combined. In advancing *colligere* as broadly representative of early evangelical cultural practice, I argue that evangelicals employed similar guidelines to

⁹ See Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 149. On evangelical habits of combinativity in religious practice, see Candy Gunther Brown, "Chiropractic and Christianity: The Power of Pain to Adjust Cultural Alignments," *Church History* 79.1 (March 2010), 144–181.

determine what cultural materials and practices could profitably be appropriated and reconciled with orthodoxy.

Any work on evangelicalism requires some grappling with boundaries and definitions. Historians in the field have long recognized the fuzziness of the term and struggled to articulate some set of essential qualities, beliefs, or attitudes that capture the essence of this amorphous movement. As W. R. Ward noted, “Evangelicals, in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the word, seem generally to have found it easier to recognize each other than others have found it to categorize them.”¹⁰ My initial decision on who and what counted as evangelical for the purposes of this study was guided by a simple premise: if a subject emphasized the importance of personal conversion, a Christ-centered piety, the authority of scripture, and the call to spread the gospel (or affirmed support for revivalism), then in my books he or she could be counted as an evangelical. To such an extent, I generally followed David Bebbington’s classic “quadrilateral” of evangelical characteristics: conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism, and evangelism, though I believe that W. R. Ward’s more robust “evangelical hexagon” (consisting of mysticism, small-group religion, deferred eschatology, experimental approach to conversion, anti-Aristotelianism or opposition to theological system, and vitalist understanding of nature) more effectively communicates the complexity and intellectual inheritance informing the eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century movement.¹¹

At the same time, I suspect such definitional games can only take us so far in appreciating the historical plasticity of evangelicalism on the ground. It also fails to evoke

¹⁰ Ward, *Early Evangelicalism*, 6.

¹¹ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2–3. W. R. Ward, *Early Evangelicalism*, 4.

for the modern reader much of the vital force that animated early evangelical piety. A more helpful approach may be found in a consideration of internal tensions or dialectics (for instance, Enlightenment and enthusiasm), a method I employ throughout this work in attending to the variety of ways in which the spiritual potential of nature generated both joy and fear for evangelicals.¹² One non-negotiable, in matters pertaining to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is the need to refrain from positioning evangelicals in opposition to liberal Protestantism, a binary that began to emerge only in the later decades of the nineteenth century.¹³ This presentist reflex, I believe, is one reason that the subject of nature has received so little attention from historians of evangelicalism. In the twentieth-century divorce of modernists and evangelicals (read: fundamentalists), evangelicals got the Bible, liberals got the book of nature. From the rearward looking gaze of scholarship (and popular culture more generally), nature was coded liberal. All the more reason, then, for approaching evangelicalism as a historical shorthand for a set of evolving and contested traits and attitudes rather than a precisely deployable term or, better, as a family of Protestant groups linked by a common theological inheritance but who, like most families, tend to fight as much as they get along.¹⁴

Contribution

¹² Such an approach characterizes David Hempton's work on Methodism. See, for instance, David N. Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 7.

¹³ On the rise of Christian fundamentalism and the liberal-fundamentalist debate, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ I wish to thank Kip Richardson and Elizabeth Jemison for their thoughts on definitional debates surrounding evangelicalism.

I intend this dissertation as a contribution to debates in American Studies over the place of nature in early American religion and culture. From Perry Miller's Puritan "errand into the wilderness" to Catherine Albanese's "nature religion," narratives of American religion have read attitudes to nature as a synecdoche for the spiritual psyche of the nation.¹⁵ Few figures in American religious history match Miller for eloquence and influence. Over the course of his career, Miller traced the emergence of an antebellum "cult of Nature" from a growing disenchantment with orthodox Christianity, specifically a disgust with what he called "a narrow and noisy revivalism."¹⁶ In "The Location of American Religious Freedom," Miller argued that modern religious pluralism or the "freedom of the mind" had emerged in the United States from a historical contingency: the antebellum tension between Emersonian nature worship and the "Biblicist and ineradicably revivalistic piety" of Charles Grandison Finney. Miller argued that by mid-century, writers such as Melville had already realized that "freedom of the mind is not to be found in a sniveling church which humiliates a man by advertising his sins, but in the

¹⁵ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 1–15; Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). The term "nature piety" is a conscious reference to Albanese's work, which presents "nature religion" as the vital strain or "symbolic center" of American religious history (7). While Albanese surveys a range of religious movements and individuals in her work, antebellum evangelicals are largely absent. When they do appear (most significantly, in a vignette on the Hutchinson Family Singers in the introduction) Albanese reads them as an expression of larger patterns of nature religion without reference to the specific and limited theological commitments that shape and frame their beliefs and practices. The suggestion underlying her study is that devotion to nature is what "really" animates her subjects, an approach that tends to flatten distinctiveness and particularity. At the same time, I share Albanese's commitment to exploring how religious views of nature have been "embodied and enacted, not simply pondered" (200).

¹⁶ Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 159.

sublimity of Nature.”¹⁷ Ordinary Americans may have taken longer to catch up to Melville, but finally they, too, found a surrogate piety and a founding myth for the nation in the “enduring, the consoling, the uncontentious verities of Nature.”¹⁸ Nature trumped nature’s God.

Miller’s survey of nature’s role in the creation of American identity, produced during the decades of liberal confidence following the Scopes Trial, made it clear that one needn’t pay much attention to noisy revivalists like Hannah Syng Bunting or William Walker. While Miller acknowledged that traces of the cult of nature were present in all levels and corners of American society, he wrote, “One would hardly expect to find much of it among the leaping shouters, the yelping and jerking converts at the mammoth Cane Ridge meeting. Anyone who knows the New England peasantry knows that you can never get an authentic Vermont farmer to admire the view.”¹⁹

Later historians and literary scholars embraced this narrative of the liberalizing or secularizing thrust of nature religion, climbing from late Puritanism to Transcendentalism and the early conservation movement without a sideways glance at evangelicals, despite their overwhelming dominance in nineteenth-century American culture.²⁰ Ryan Cordell has argued that scholars of nineteenth-century American literature sensitive to the influence of religion have focused “almost exclusively on the liberalizing trends within

¹⁷ Ibid., 152.

¹⁸ Ibid., 159.

¹⁹ Ibid., 152.

²⁰ By 1855, there were 13,550 Unitarians in the United States. In contrast, by 1850, Methodists had grown to the largest denomination in the country (1,577,014), followed by the Baptists (1,105,546). Figures cited in Ryan Cordell, “‘That Great Burning Day’: Apocalypticism in Antebellum American Literature and Culture,” unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Virginia, 2010, 7.

Unitarianism and Congregationalism, or on the lingering echoes of Puritanism in the works of certain nineteenth-century writers.”²¹ Cordell highlighted the case of Ernest Lee Tuveson, who in the final chapter of *Redeemer Nation* acknowledged that “every writer he has quoted, save one, has been a Unitarian, Congregationalist, or Presbyterian, despite the fact that a fraction of communicants in antebellum American churches belonged to these three denominations.”²² More recently, John Gatta has surveyed the “theologies and spiritualities of nature variously reflected” in American literature from the Puritans to the late twentieth century. Gatta’s nineteenth-century cast includes such familiar faces as William Cullen Bryant, James Fenimore Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, but not a single representative from antebellum revivalism.²³

European scholarship was just as prone to overlook evangelicals or introduce them as antiquated foils. Keith Thomas followed the broader tendency among “New Left” social historians such as E. P. Thompson in regarding evangelicalism as a retardant to

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²² *Ibid.* Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 192. Art history is guilty of similar sins of omission. Barbara Novak’s *Nature and Culture* was groundbreaking in its attention to the influence of religion on nineteenth-century American landscape painting. Yet, Transcendentalist writers were largely taken as representative of nineteenth-century American views, with revivalism limited to two references in the index. Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). As in other fields, that has begun to change. For instance, Rebecca Bedell has shown how Benjamin Silliman, a devout Congregationalist and professor of geology and chemistry at Yale, helped inspire the dramatic landscapes of Thomas Cole by being “among the first of his countrymen to urge American landscape painters to study geology.” Bedell similarly argues that Asher Durand’s small-scale, particularized scenes of boulders and streams from the 1850s owed a debt to popular evangelical works such as Hugh Miller’s *The Old Red Sandstone*. See Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology and American Landscape Painting, 1825–1875* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²³ John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

progress in the modern age. In *Man and the Natural World*, which surveyed changing attitudes to nature in Britain between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Thomas contrasted the emerging emphasis on nature's beauty among Romantic poets with George Whitefield's "older, more fearful attitude" to trees.²⁴ Thomas's trajectory for the English cult of nature culminates in the writings of a disenchanted evangelical, John Ruskin, a role commonly filled in American narratives by John Muir.²⁵

There were of course exceptions to the trend that treated the elevated conversations in Concord's salons as broadly representative of antebellum attitudes to nature. Noting the Transcendentalists' ambivalent relation to the national scene, Henry F. May suggested more common ground between Finney and Emerson than Miller had allowed.

Like so many American intellectuals, Emerson and his friends were deeply on the side of the people but differed with most of them on almost every religious or political question. And yet for some odd reason Concord intellectuals were saying some of the same things as revivalist preachers...about certain matters crucially important to all: the sources of knowledge and the tests of truth. Really to understand Emerson and Thoreau, or for that matter Whitman and Hawthorne, one has to bear in mind, among others, Charles Grandison Finney, Phoebe Palmer, and Joseph Smith.²⁶

²⁴ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 213. Thomas offers no evidence of Whitefield's "older, more fearful attitude" to trees nor does he explain how the sense of nature's capacity to be inhabited by dangerous spiritual forces precluded its capacity on other occasions to shadow more pleasant or joyful forms of spiritual presence.

²⁵ On the religious views and background of John Muir, see Stephen J. Holmes, *The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999); Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁶ Henry F. May, "Intellectual History and Religious History," in *Ideas, Faith, and Feelings: Essays on American Intellectual and Religious History, 1952–1982* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 156. Richard E. Brantley has made a similar argument in his study of the interplay of empiricism and evangelicalism in the writings of John Wesley, Jonathan

Ralph Gabriel, in his study of popular Romanticism in nineteenth-century America, noted similar continuities between revivalism and Transcendentalism. Gabriel pointed up the scholarly tendency to characterize “the ecstasy of frontier revivalistic religious experience” as “a manifestation of sect tradition and practices,” while the “communion with nature as that of Bushnell and Emerson has been called mysticism.” In fact, Gabriel argued, “the similarities between the two types of individual emotional experience outweighs the differences. Nineteenth-century Protestantism as a people’s religion and transcendentalism as a faith for the more cultivated few were both, at bottom, romantic religions.”²⁷ Such dissent failed to disinter the vein of secularization theory propelling narratives of the nineteenth century, seen as a hinge of American history, when the nation swung from inherited colonial forms of authority and institutional life (Christian, European, monarchic, paternalistic) to distinctly American forms (secular, pluralistic, democratic, egalitarian), nor did they dislodge the tendency to

Edwards, Thomas Carlyle, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Brantley argues that all four writers shared the “simultaneously rational and sensationalist reliance on experience as the avenue to both natural and spiritual knowledge,” a method which he considers “one of the most important indigenous roots of Anglo-American literature in the early modern world.” Richard E. Brantley, *Coordinates of Anglo-American Romanticism: Wesley, Edwards, Carlyle, and Emerson* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 2, 5.

²⁷ Ralph H. Gabriel, “Evangelical Religion and Popular Romanticism in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Church History* 19.1 (March 1950), 45. Recently, historians have begun to spot more common ground. In his study of the rise of modern American spirituality, Leigh Schmidt has noted the shared appreciation among evangelicals and Transcendentalists for the devotional writings of mystical writers such as Jeanne Marie Guyon and William Law. “They could agree, too,” Schmidt writes, “that the natural world was filled with divine encryptions awaiting those with the spiritual senses to decipher them.” Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 43.

exaggerate the contemporary influence of elite, regional movements such as Transcendentalism.²⁸

The first tremors of change were felt in the early 1980s, when the political resurgence of conservative religion alerted scholars to the continuing vitality of American evangelicalism. It also hastened a reconsideration of secularization theory, the belief that processes of modernization are accompanied by the declining authority of religious institutions in the public sphere and the withering of private religious belief and practice. The dissertation offers an alternative perspective on religion and nature in the early republic by attending to evangelical revivalism, arguably the dominant religious culture of the nineteenth century. It avoids the tendency to treat revivalism and the “cult of nature” as mutually exclusive movements and concerns, or to read interest in the spiritual potential of the natural world as a Trojan horse of heresy. Through analysis of diaries and letters, novels, hymns, sermons, poetry, lithographs, and religious practice, the dissertation explains how a sense of place and space was implicated in a series of initiatives to revivify belief and behavior associated with discrete stages in the evangelical spiritual life: the “new birth,” the “new life,” and the “new earth.” In line with how contemporary literary scholars are reassessing Romanticism as a movement of reenchantment rather than as a form of secularization or “natural supernaturalism,” the

²⁸ See, for instance, Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes*, new ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957); Arthur Ekirch, *Man and Nature in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Cecelia Tichi, *New World, New Earth: Environmental Reform in American Literature from the Puritans through Whitman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

current project argues for seeing evangelical traditions of nature piety as part of larger nineteenth-century efforts at reenchanted the world.²⁹

Jonathan Edwards stands as an important exception to the exclusion of evangelical voices from narratives of religion and nature in America.³⁰ Edwards's resurrection by historians began with Perry Miller.³¹ But a paradox of the Edwards revival has been to silence rather than to stimulate scholarly interest in broader evangelical attitudes to the natural world beyond Edwards.³² In general, Jonathan

²⁹ For the classic statement on the secularizing thrust of Romanticism, see W. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1971); for a recent reappraisal of Abrams's thesis, see Colin Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). My approach is influenced by Linford Fisher. In an interview about *The Indian Great Awakening* (Oxford, 2012), Fisher questioned the claim that the "enchanted worlds" of colonial America declined or disappeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "I have long found that colonial Americans continued to live in enchanted worlds, despite the apparent breakdown in the sharedness of this world in the early eighteenth century between educated elite leaders and the people in the pew. Even more, history has a funny way of moving in cycles; fast forward another hundred years and, immediately following a supposedly "secular" phase of American history—i.e., the decade or so immediately following the American Revolution—suddenly you have massive revivals breaking out in Kentucky, Virginia, and eventually New York and New England. I increasingly believe that there have always been portions of American society who live in 'enchanted worlds'—both in the eighteenth century and now (the rise of global Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement attest to the ongoing power of enchantment today, I think)." <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2012/02/indian-great-awakening-interview-with.html>.

³⁰ Timothy Dwight is perhaps another exception, but his works have primarily interested primarily scholars of American literature, who have focused on Dwight's attempts to forge an epic poetry for the new nation. See John McWilliams, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770–1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³¹ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: W. Sloane Associates, 1949); "From Edwards to Emerson," *Errand into the Wilderness*, 184–203.

³² A few recent studies of Jonathan Edwards include: Conrad Cherry, *Nature and Religious Imagination: From Edwards to Bushnell* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); Clyde Holbrook, *Jonathan Edwards, the Valley, and Nature* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1987); and Avihu Zale, "Jonathan Edwards and the Language of Nature: The Re-enchantment of

Edwards has been treated as an exemplary case of an evangelical who spiritualized nature. In so doing, however, he became *sui generis*. Edwards's Platonic meditations on nature as an emanation of the divine being isolated him from and elevated him above the later tradition, which was presented as being consumed with evangelism or social reform, activities which left little time or interest for tapping the spiritual potential of the natural world. Evangelicalism after Edwards was a declension narrative. Evangelicals became busybodies and moralizers, who forfeited the spiritual consolations of nature to liberals. This view was encouraged by the tendency to focus on elite theology as opposed to broader religious practice. It was also encouraged by an unconscious identification of "nature" and "world," a slippage not found in evangelical literature of the period. For antebellum evangelicals, nature offered a safe set of alternative pleasures over and against worldly temptations. In chapter three, I argue that retreat into nature was encouraged as a form of separation from the world in order to foster the love of God, seen as necessary balance to the duties of evangelism and service, the love of neighbor.

Singular attention to the theology of Jonathan Edwards may also have encouraged the neglect of other theological influences on antebellum evangelicalism. In *America's God*, Mark Noll defended Edwards's early nineteenth-century influence by claiming that he was the most republished theologian in America between 1800 and 1839 (69 republished works). To do so, however, he discounts reprints of the English Puritans Richard Baxter (112 reprintings, mostly editions of *Saints Everlasting Rest*) and John Bunyan as "devotional" works, a decision that may reflect a broader tendency among historians to

the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning," *Journal of Religious History* 26.1 (February 2002): 15–41. On recent scholarly and popular interest in Jonathan Edwards, see Leigh E. Schmidt, "The Edwards Revival: Or, The Public Consequences of Exceedingly Careful Scholarship," review essay, *William and Mary Quarterly* 58.2 (April 2001), 480–86.

treat devotional literature less seriously than works of formal theological reflection.³³ As it turns out, Baxter, who I cite in chapter two as a source of evangelical practices of contemplating the natural world as a means to spiritual progress, was reprinted far more often than Edwards in the early nineteenth century. In their letters and journals, evangelicals from a range of social circumstances and denominational backgrounds cite *Saints Everlasting Rest* with surprising affection and frequency, from elite figures such as the novelist and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe to Methodist circuit riders such as Benjamin Lakin.³⁴

Prodded by the “frontier thesis” of Frederick Jackson Turner, an earlier generation of historians such as Catharine Cleveland and Peter Mode considered how westward expansion into new territories shaped religious life in the early republic.³⁵ Turner’s acolytes endowed natural forces and features of the landscape with nearly deterministic powers. Approaching nature as a given rather than as a projection of human culture, they helped turn the frontier into a byword for American exceptionalism, ignoring transatlantic continuities. In the spirit of recent works by Alexandra Waltham and Simon Schama, this study applies the tools of cultural history to the problem of landscape, treating landscape as a repository of cultural memory, as text rather than

³³ Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 520. I wish to thank Kip Richardson for bringing these figures to my attention.

³⁴ As I discuss in chapter two, Baxter’s rediscovery by early evangelicals was aided by John Wesley’s decision to include *Saints Everlasting Rest* in his Christian Library, the cheap reprint of spiritual classics intended to accompany Methodist itinerants on the frontier.

³⁵ See Catharine C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West, 1797–1805* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916); Peter G. Mode, *The Frontier Spirit in American Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1923). Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996).

territory.³⁶ While focused on the American context, it situates its interpretations in the broader currents of English Puritanism and Methodism and German Pietism, not to mention the wider intellectual and cultural influences of Enlightenment and Romanticism.

If scholarship on nature has largely overlooked evangelicals or set them as foils against progressive movements of valuing nature, scholarship on evangelicalism has tended to ignore the natural world, reinforcing assumptions that liberalizing currents monopolized antebellum experiments with the spiritual potential of nature. Ruth Alden Doan has recently argued that early American Methodists were largely indifferent to nature, noting that communal religious practices such as revivalism positioned religious experience “against or away from any specific physical setting.” For pioneers such as

³⁶ See Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995). Gregory Clark has expressed a similar view regarding the difference between land and landscape: “*Land* is material, a particular object, while *landscape* is conceptual...*Land* becomes *landscape* when it is assigned the role of symbol.” Gregory Clark, *Rhetorical Landscape in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 9. On landscape theory, see Alan R. H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chapter 4; Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, eds., *Landscape, Memory, and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (London and Sterling, Va.: Pluto, 2003); Ian D. Whyte, *Landscape and History since 1500* (London: Reaktion, 2002); Barbara Bender and Margot Winer, eds., *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile, and Place* (Berg: New York, 2001); Richard Muir, *Approaches to Landscape* (Basingstoke: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); Eric Hirsch and Michael O’Hanlon, eds., *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Christopher Tilley, *The Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), and *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Alan R. H. Baker and Gideon Biger, eds., *Ideology and Landscape in Historical Perspective: Essays on the Meanings of Some Places in the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Francis Asbury, she argues, nature was “rough, challenging, dangerous; it was backdrop rather than source.”³⁷ Doan writes:

Although early Methodists spent a great deal of time traveling through wilderness, passing through an unspoiled natural world, or retreating to the woods to pray, they did not learn from the Methodist community to perceive the natural world as a source of spiritual experience in itself. Circuit riders rode past trees, stumbled on rocks, forded streams, and there they found...nothing but trees and rocks and streams. [Francis] Asbury once commented, “O what a world of swamps, and rivers, and islands, we live in here!” but showed no inclination to unpack the metaphors that seem obvious in retrospect.³⁸

Doan is right to assert that Methodists did not require a particular kind of space for religious worship. Free grace could be sought and found anywhere: under a shed roof or the cope of heaven, it made little difference. God dwelt not in houses made with human hands, the faithful averred, but in the body of the gathered church. Doan is also wise to avoid romanticizing early Methodist pioneers.³⁹ On the antebellum frontier, itinerants were often too occupied with the business of saving souls and staying alive to pay much attention to anything else. As Robert Bray put it, “To make a Wordsworthian child of nature out of Peter Cartwright would be to turn the Methodist bulldog into a lamb among the daffodils.”⁴⁰

However, Doan errs in suggesting that the challenges of existence on the frontier extinguished the spiritual potential of nature. As I demonstrate in chapter two, both

³⁷ Ruth Alden Doan, “Worship, Experience, and the Creation of Methodist Place,” in James D. Bratt, ed., *By the Vision of Another World: Worship in American History* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmanns), 52.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁹ Doan’s attitude may in part be a reaction to the nostalgia of an earlier generation of church historians for the “heroic” age of frontier revivalism and camp meetings.

⁴⁰ Robert Bray, *Peter Cartwright: Legendary Frontier Preacher* (University of Illinois Press, 2005), 157.

Asbury and his colleague Thomas Coke were keen observers of the natural environments through which they passed, enlisting their observations and experiences in their attempts share more deeply in the life of Christ. Further down the social ladder, Methodist itinerants such as Joshua Thomas and William Glendinning located a robust sense of the sacred in localized features in the landscape.⁴¹ Doan also errs by equating pre-Romantic attitudes with indifference to nature, and by suggesting that natural space for early evangelicals was mere backdrop to the real focus of religious experience. My research has found that believers experienced the natural world as a site of both spiritual possibility and danger. The dissertation argues that, for a significant number of early evangelicals, the natural world served both as setting and source of divine grace and spiritual transformation. From initial awakening and conversion to the lifelong struggle for an increasing share of holiness or sanctification, evangelicals engaged the natural world through a range of practices that affected body and spirit. Their motivations for doing so, while running parallel in some ways to the concerns of Romantics and Transcendentalists, continue a number of ancient Christian debates concerning the spiritual senses, the possibility and forms of spiritual progress, and cyclical patterns of absence, desire, and divine union in traditions of bridegroom and nature mysticism.⁴² All

⁴¹ On Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, see chapter two. On Joshua Thomas and William Glendinning, see chapter one.

⁴² On traditions of bridal and nature mysticism in Puritanism, see Belden Lane, “Two Schools of Desire: Nature and Marriage in Seventeenth-Century Puritanism,” *Church History* 69:2 (2000): 372–402. Lane argues that by the end of the seventeenth century, emphasis on desire had begun to fade as a dominant theme in Puritan spirituality. With turn to reason and Enlightenment, its bold eroticism had become something of an embarrassment. He nevertheless observes that the tradition continued in work of Jonathan Edwards, then jumps to the twentieth century, suggesting a modern recovery of this tradition in the ecological sensibility of poets such as Wendell Berry. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are notable gaps in his genealogy of this important devotional

of this amounts to a tradition of evangelical nature piety that has yet to be identified, documented, and incorporated into broader narratives of antebellum revivalism.

The dissertation also supports ongoing efforts by historians and social scientists to rethink the origins and pathways of secularization in the modern West. My research aims are relevant in light of the long literature, beginning with Max Weber, assessing the implication of Protestantism in modern processes of “disenchantment.” As Alexandra Walsham argues, despite “the originality of Protestantism’s theoretical assault on the immanence of the holy and its campaign to evacuate the divine from the material universe...overly bold claims about the role played by the Reformation in promoting disenchantment may run the risk of eclipsing the curious and paradoxical side effects of this complex movement.”⁴³ Among these side effects was a tendency to hallow in memory spaces linked to experiences of outdoor worship, conversion, sanctification, and sudden physical healing, a tendency that, I argue, accelerated with the rise of evangelical revivalism. By attending to tensions in cultural practice and by approaching secularization as social and cultural contest rather than as process, the dissertation reveals how evangelicals felt torn between a desire to cleanse the natural landscape of idols and an urge to sanctify spaces marked by the Holy Spirit, thereby complicating views of evangelicals as simple agents of either enchantment or disenchantment.⁴⁴

tradition, which the current study attempts to address.

⁴³ Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape*, 151–2.

⁴⁴ The contemporary literature reassessing secularization is extensive. For the state of debates concerning the meaning of “disenchantment” in a Weberian sense and its influence on the historiography of secularization, see, Walsham, “The Reformation and the Disenchantment of the World Reassessed.” Influences on my own approach include Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard

Even the best recent scholarship has sometimes fallen afoul of simplistic and static characterizations of “enchanted” and “disenchanted” views of the natural world. In his Bancroft Prize–winning work, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier*, James Merrell emphasizes the “deeply spiritual nature of Indian travel through the woods,” showing how for the Iroquois and other Native American groups, all of nature—rocks, rivers, trees, mountains—was alive with spirits. The woods, he writes, were an “enchanted realm, a land of opportunity but also of peril.” As a case in point, Merrell describes how one group of Indians named a spot on the Susquehanna River “Ponk-utenink” or “the town of the Ponkis,’ tiny insects known for their ferocious bite,” believing that they had been created from the dust and ashes of a vanquished sorcerer.⁴⁵

Merrell’s meticulous retrieval of Native American attitudes and practices contrasts with his rather flat depiction of the eighteenth-century European colonist. Unlike the enchanted Indian, he writes, “To a Pennsylvania traveler...snow and rain simply fell, toads merely croaked, bugs just bit.”⁴⁶ Perhaps this captures the experience of many early travelers in Pennsylvania, but certainly not all. This dissertation argues that for early

University Press, 2007). On the treatment of secularization as social and cultural “contest” rather than a unidirectional “process,” see Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848–1914* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000); David Hempton, “Protestant Migrations: Narratives of the Rise and Decline of Religion in the North Atlantic World c. 1650–1950” in Callum Brown and Michael Snape, eds., *Secularization in the Christian World* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010), 41–56; David D. Hall, “Religion and Secularization in America: A Cultural Approach,” in Hartmut Lehmann, ed., *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung in neuzeitlichen Europa: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 118–130; and Christian Smith, ed., *Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁴⁵ James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 147.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

evangelicals, all of nature both animate and inanimate was endowed with spiritual vitality and meaning. Marking verses such as Luke 19:40 (“I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out”) believers cultivated a vision of creation united in a state of unceasing prayer and praise to the creator. In chapter two, I show how the early Methodists such as Thomas Coke advanced their devotion to Christ through mystical communion with the natural world. Coke turned his itinerancy on the American frontier into a continual meditation on the book of nature, in one case, interpreting an ordeal with ticks as a form of *imitatio Christi*.⁴⁷ In moments of delight as well as suffering, evangelicals sought a closer union with Christ through union with the natural world.

Sources

The dissertation employs a range of sources, including a number of cultural materials not previously considered by scholars of religion and nature. Throughout the dissertation, I make extensive use of evangelical hymns, especially those from the shape-note singing tradition central to revivalism, as a source of theological ideas and practices concerning the natural world. Most of these hymns are taken from collections previously considered only by musicologists and folkways scholars. My use of popular prints and lithographs was motivated by a similar desire to access popular cultural materials as

⁴⁷ The cultural and religious strategies that Merrell ascribes to eighteenth-century Iroquois had ready parallels among eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century evangelicals. Merrell writes: “Hearing or speaking with spirits did not transform an Indian’s trip from an ordeal into a lark: flies still bit and rain still fell, the ground was just as rocky and the hills just as steep, the Endless Mountains still went on forever and the streams remained ‘fretful or tedious.’ But that these lands were inhabited by invisible beings ‘with which their old men can talk’—which they could explain and, sometimes, propitiate—made the domain beyond the woods’ edge less intimidating, more easily endured, even if never completely controlled.” Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 147.

opposed to more elite sources such as traditions of landscape oil painting. In addition, I make use of published journals, poems, short stories, and other materials written by laypeople and elite clergy, many of whom, such as Hannah Syng Bunting, Henry Foster, Jeremiah Ingalls, Caroline Matilda Thayer, Erastus Root, and Theophilus Packard, are new to scholarly narratives of evangelicalism. Many others are familiar figures whose views on nature haven't previously been considered. Such sources offer a window on the broader thought-worlds or lived religion of American evangelicals, suggesting the ways in which believers selected, negotiated, and created from available alternative practices and ideas pertaining to the spiritual potential of nature.⁴⁸ So far as I am aware, no previous study has engaged religious practice in considering evangelical attitudes to the natural world, neither has any study of religion and nature been structured around the frame of the progressive spiritual life.⁴⁹ Such an approach, I argue, can help to paint a fuller picture of how American evangelicals experienced and engaged with the world of nature in their everyday walk of faith. It also suggests ways in which antebellum evangelicals—practitioners and theorizers, clergy and laity, northerners and southerners—inhabited a shared culture of nature, without eliding the impact of differences such as denomination or gender.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ On lived religion, see David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark R. Valeri, eds., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

⁴⁹ My decision to connect traditions of evangelical nature piety to progressive stages in the spiritual life was influenced by a tendency in recent scholarship to counteract the scholarly focus on conversion by highlighting ways in which evangelical spirituality was understood as a progressive journey. See, for instance, Bruce D. Hindmarsh, “‘End of Faith as Its Beginning’: Models of Spiritual Progress in Early Evangelical Devotional Hymns,” *Spiritus* 10:1 (2010), 1–21.

Chapter Overview

The dissertation is structured roughly to follow the arc of development in evangelical spiritual life, moving from conversion (the new birth) to sanctification (the new life), culminating in preparation for the world to come or the millennium (the new earth). Each chapter addresses a set of characteristic themes and tensions. The first chapter, “Landscapes of Redemption: Conversion, Idolatry, and the Spiritual Sense of Nature,” explores the ways in which practices of evangelism and conversion were informed by a sense of natural space. Evangelicals engaged in practices of field preaching, camp meetings, and outdoor baptism often by necessity rather than choice. By appealing to scriptural precedents of outdoor worship and harnessing primitivist and antiformalist arguments in favor of the priority of natural over built space, they made necessity a virtue. Through rituals of naming and renaming, evangelicals layered the natural environment with allusions to biblical sites, constructing a spiritual landscape that enhanced their distinctive practices and beliefs. Yet their activity also raised the ancient specters of idolatry and superstition, placing official Protestant opposition to “sacred localities,” and the corresponding doctrine of the universal presence of God in creation,

⁵⁰ Arguably, consideration of race is just as crucial to any narrative of antebellum evangelical forms of nature piety. However, given limitations of time and space, for the purposes of this dissertation, I have restricted myself to a consideration of “white” evangelical culture. My argument that antebellum nature piety communicates a shared cultural world or mentality has been influenced by several studies of colonial New England, notably David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982). Ann Taves has defended the usefulness in writing the history of practitioners and theorizers together in *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

in tension with utilitarian priorities and a scriptural pattern of hallowing localized sites marked by divine presence and action. Sensitive to the charge that outdoor worship had perverted rather than restored primitive worship, evangelicals appealed to biblical models and argued that the spiritual senses, awakened in the moment of conversion, enabled believers to worship Christ's presence in the natural world without fear of idolatry.

For many evangelicals, the new birth marked not the end but the beginning of engagement with the natural world. The second chapter, “‘Evangelical Mysticism’: Spiritual Progress, Divine Union, and Contemplation of the Book of Nature,” explores the motivations and methods by which evangelicals engaged the natural world to advance in what was commonly termed the “new life.” Identified with the pursuit of holiness or sanctification, this “wilderness” stage, which was characterized by a steady, elliptical pursuit of an increasing share of the divine presence, was frequently advanced by practices of contemplation on the book of nature. “Looking through nature up to nature’s God” drew on senses spiritual as well as common. In contrast to the public language of natural theology, which dealt in abstract, evidential proofs, it spoke an insider language of experiential knowledge for the spiritually advanced. Eclectic and unsystematic, contemplative practices drew on techniques of “spiritualizing the creatures” developed in the devotional writings of late medieval mysticism and early modern Catholicism, German Pietism, and English Puritanism (especially Richard Baxter). Major themes included the imitation of Christ, divine ascent, mystical annihilation, and union with Christ through union with the creation, which was apostrophized as a model of unceasing prayer. While both women and men engaged in the exegesis of the “book of creatures,” the former faced special opportunities as well as anxieties. As an advanced spiritual practice, practitioners had always to face down accusations of pantheism, which suggested

a loss of ontological identity between God and the self or creation as a whole, and quietism, understood as the adoption of an attitude of radical passivity that shirked Christ's injunction to actively spread the Kingdom of God through evangelism and service.

The third chapter, "Healing Springs: Nature-Cure, Practical Vitalism, and the Therapeutic Landscape," extends consideration of the analogical imagination and the place of nature in the "new life," engaging the pursuit of physical health and healing as a complement to practices of contemplation. Accordingly, the chapter attends to evangelical engagement with the therapeutic potential of water as an expression of the larger commitment to "nature cure" within the progressive spiritual life. While hydrotherapy was popular among antebellum Americans of all stripes, evangelical engagement with hydrotherapy stood apart in at least three respects. First, the "miraculous" cures often attributed to mineral springs were understood to lay bare the analogical structure of the cosmos. Through appeals to the web of correspondences between the curative virtues of water and the cleansing power of Christ's blood, evangelicals engaged hydropathy and other forms of nature-cure as a mode of pre-evangelism. Second, evangelicals were more likely than non-evangelicals to link hydrotherapy and moral reform efforts such as temperance, arguing for a holistic approach to health that engaged spirit and body. Finally, evangelicals frequently addressed nature as a divine intermediary but imposed greater restrictions on its autonomy than many other religious groups of the period.

In their devotion to practice, evangelicals demonstrated a commitment to a practical vitalism, affirming the natural world as animated by spirit, albeit one that required negotiation with orthodox conceptions of providence and official Protestant

opposition to divine intermediaries. Situating attitudes to mineral springs within larger historical shifts regarding the preternatural, the chapter argues that attempts by evangelicals to account for the strange and rare properties of mineral springs were characterized by deep tensions and contradictions. As wonders, mineral springs seemed to bubble up from the muddy middle ground between the regular, orderly operation of natural laws and the special, supernatural interruption or contravention of those laws, commonly known as miracles. At times, they seemed to buck against the limits of their theological vocabulary, a vocabulary that constantly threatened to exile God from his creation or identify him too closely with it.

In the fourth chapter, I examine the way in which practical vitalism fed speculation on cosmology and eschatology or concern with the “last things” and the nature of the world to come. The antebellum world was awash in a sea of ethers, subtle or “imponderable” (weightless) fluids whose existence was postulated by natural philosophers to account for phenomena as various as light, heat, gravity, magnetism, and electricity, as well as the “vital spark” behind organic life itself. At the level of popular practice, talk of ethers was just as pervasive. Electrotherapists, mesmerists, and spiritualists all claimed to be able to manipulate and direct the invisible fluids (thought to be electrical, magnetic, or both) that surrounded or permeated the physical world. Through a case study of the works of Edward Hitchcock, the Amherst geologist and Congregational minister, the fourth chapter, “The Theology of Electricity: Electrotherapy, Mesmerism, and the Science of Heaven,” considers how practical engagement with vitalist practices fed speculation regarding the “new world.” Building on the claims of mesmerists to have direct sensory perception of spiritual realities, Hitchcock argued that the luminiferous (light-bearing) ether constituted an intermediary “third

substance” halfway between spirit and matter, which would furnish the *prima materia* for the spiritual body at the resurrection and precipitate the dramatic renovations of the physical creation described in the Book of Revelation. Believing that orthodoxy required a new metaphysic equal to the appeal of Romantic systems of belief, in a trilogy of works published in the 1850s, Hitchcock pursued what he called a “science of heaven,” a system of knowledge that moved beyond the limitations imposed by analogy to provide glimpses of the deep structures of the universe. Later in life, after the eruption of the Spiritualist controversy, Hitchcock began to harbor fears that such investigations of the invisible world might have crossed a line into forbidden territory. Hitchcock’s theology of electricity signaled a high point as well as a turning point in antebellum evangelical engagement with vitalism.

There once was a time when scholars regarded Enlightenment and Romanticism as the magnetic poles of modern thought.⁵¹ Currently, historians tend to see as much continuity as discontinuity, a position I support.⁵² A practical people, antebellum evangelicals were happy to mix their metaphors, praising nature’s orderly progress and savage unpredictability in the same breath. They could find delight or judgment in the irregularity of mountainous terrain and untamed forests no less than a well-tended garden or pasture. Displays of God’s raw power in storm and waterfall could spur reflections on

⁵¹ David Bebbington has argued that in the early decades of the nineteenth century, British and American evangelicals moved away from the cultural sensibility of Enlightenment toward Romanticism, a movement that he described as “well fitted to be a vehicle for religious thought.” Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 80.

⁵² See, for instance, Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Pantheon Press, 2009).

the constancy of God's love and paternal protection. Each site offered its own potential for cultivation of a sense of divine presence or absence.

At the same time, there remain good reasons to read the romantic quest for a felt sense of the divinity of nature in part as a reaction against the perceived weaknesses of mechanistic models of a law-abiding universe. By the second half of the eighteenth century, Deism had exposed the flaws in orthodox enthusiasm for the mechanistic argument, making God's orderly machine into a means to distance creation from creator. Joseph Lathrop, Congregational pastor of the First Church in West Springfield, Massachusetts, spoke directly to the specter of infidelity lurking within mechanism. The deist, Lathrop argued, made the same use of God

as you do of gravitation and attraction.... Your God is nothing more than a *natural* cause of events, and in his hands the universe is nothing better than a system of *mechanism*. And such a belief will have no more influence on your heart and conduct, than a belief that the tides are caused by the moon, that a thunderstorm is produced by electrical fire, or that the material system is held together by attraction.⁵³

If evangelicals feared infidelity in cosmologies that forsook the reality of divine presence, they also feared any idea or religious practice that seemed to identify God too closely with any particular site or object in nature or with the creation as a total system. Antebellum evangelicals found much to admire in the cultural movement commonly known as Romanticism.⁵⁴ This congruency drew on a number of common predilections, including the central place of feeling in knowledge; the visionary capacity of the

⁵³ Joseph Lathrop, "On Enmity to Religion," in *Sermons on Various Subjects, Evangelical, Devotional, and Practical*, Vol. 4 (Worcester, Mass.: Isaiah Thomas, 1810), 47. Italics in original.

⁵⁴ Following David Bebbington, I evoke the broader sense of a cultural mood of Romanticism rather than the literary movement, which in Britain had already gone into decline by the 1820s.

transformed senses; a flair for the dramatic; and the spiritual significance of common, everyday life.

Yet, while evangelicals absorbed romantic currents, they were not unreflective consumers. They frequently assessed, adapted, and rejected elements of the romantic spirit in ways that suited their distinctive religious purposes and practices and that cohered with their selective retrieval of earlier Protestant and late medieval and early modern Catholic devotional culture. Devotions undertaken on private walks in the “God’s first temple” did not necessarily supplant traditional public forms of worship. Rather than paving the path to secularization through a surrogate piety, evangelical forms of nature piety worked in a fruitful tension with spaces of collective worship and world, resulting in a dialectic of engagement and retreat, contemplation and activism, absence and presence. Nor did nature typically divert the focus on Christ as the beginning and end of the spiritual life.⁵⁵ Devotion to nature fed devotion to Christ, a piety that pursued Christ as the secret life hidden in every thing.

As much as they sought to worship a sovereign God unbounded by space and time, evangelicals found it not merely impossible but undesirable to avoid the implications of the incarnation, that God had come in the flesh and dwelt among men and women and remained there even now in the mysterious ministrations of the Holy Spirit. More than anything, they spoke of the need for a “vital piety,” a living faith founded on direct experience of God rather than abstruse systems or arid dogma. Abandoning temples built by human hands and seeking their salvation in God’s primitive cathedrals, evangelicals strove to revive the piety of the church and extend the

⁵⁵ On the centrality of Christ in the progressive spiritual life of early evangelicals after conversion, see Hindmarsh, “End of Faith as Its Beginning.”

Reformation heritage by turning back the dead hand of formalism, innovation, and superstition in favor of worship practices based directly on biblical models. Vitalism offered evangelicals a middle way between idolatry and infidelity, underwriting forms of nature piety that might be confused neither with the veneration of the creation nor with the stubborn refusal to acknowledge the felt presence of the divine in the world, whether that presence was universal or particularized, permanent or fleeting, and located in routine operations and laws or in rare and marvelous provisions.

In the course of their quest for vital piety, the landscapes through which evangelicals passed became vital in two senses. For many, the natural world became a crucial gateway for grace in the progressive walk of faith, an agent of physical and spiritual transformation through deepening participation in the life of Christ. Through such experimental practices of piety, nature became vital in a second sense, alive with the divine presence, a sensibility awakened in the moment of conversion, which enabled believers to worship God in nature without fear of idolatry. Well, almost without fear.

Part I: The New Birth

Chapter 1

Landscapes of Redemption: Conversion, Idolatry, and the Spiritual Sense of Nature

In or around 1840, at a camp on Tangier Island in the Chesapeake Bay, Joshua Thomas offered a few parting words to a group of Methodists about to embark on overseas missions. Thomas, a fisherman turned preacher known locally as the “parson of the islands,” described the sort of heathenish practices the young men might encounter among those who “in their blindness bow down to wood and stone.” The “Idolater,” he said, cuts down a tree and carves and paints an image on one half. The other half he breaks up into firewood, which he uses to cook his meal. Before sitting down to eat, the idolater “falls down before the image he has just made and set up, thanks it for his food, and asks it to help him and bless him.” Such a scene would be mere comedy, Thomas suggested, were it not abhorrent to a jealous God. So he was grateful that, even in a backwater like Tangier Island, every good Methodist was an iconoclast. “Why,” he said, “ignorant as we are, if such an image were set up here for a god, our island boys would stone it.”¹

¹ Adam Wallace, *The Parson of the Islands: A Biography of the Late Rev. Joshua Thomas* (Philadelphia: Office of the Methodist Home Journal, 1870, c. 1861), 34. Thomas’s contempt for the idolatrous abuse of nature had many precedents, among them Reginald Heber’s hymn, “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains.” The most frequently printed missionary hymn in nineteenth-century American hymnals, it opened by contrasting the natural beauty of Africa and India with the ugliness of superstition, which abused and desecrated God’s gift.

From Greenland’s icy mountains, from India’s coral strand;
Where Afric’s sunny fountains roll down their golden sand:
From many an ancient river, from many a palmy plain,
They call us to deliver their land from error’s chain.

Thomas's response to idolatry—alternately ridiculing it and sounding a call to militancy and violence—fits earlier patterns of Christian iconoclasm, a history anchored in the protracted tug of war between emergent Hebraic monotheism and the earthier gods of the Fertile Crescent. Protestant reformers in England and on the Continent routinely cast the sensual devotional apparatus of late medieval Catholicism as a revival of ancient Canannite polytheism, smashing “popish” statues and stained-glass images and despoiling healing wells and saints’ shrines in an effort to disinter the primitive gospel from superstitious accretions that had buried God’s sovereignty under a host of intermediaries.² This cultural reformation of the landscape was not restricted to European Wars of Religion. In colonial Massachusetts in 1628, Puritan soldiers marched into Merrymount, where a rival English settlement had erected a Maypole trussed up with ribbons, flowers, and a “peare of buckshorts.” With little ado, they chopped down the vexing idol, which the precise Protestants at nearby Plymouth had dubbed the “Calf of Horeb.”³

What though the spicy breezes blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle;
Though every prospect pleases, and only man is vile?
In vain with lavish kindness the gifts of God are strown;
The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone.

The hymn was first published in *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* (March 1823), 132.

² On the iconoclastic legacy of the Reformation, see J. R. Phillips, *The Reformation of Images: Destruction of Art in England, 1535–1660* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); David Knowles, *Bare Ruined Choirs: The Dissolution of the English Monasteries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–1580*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Julie Spraggon, *Puritan Iconoclasm in the English Civil War* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell Press, 2003).

³ Thomas Morton, *The New English Canaan* (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1883), 277.

Despite its apparent clarity, iconoclasm frequently ran into the dilemma of deciding what counted as idolatry. Not all cases were as clear-cut as a Maypole. Apparent inconsistencies within the biblical record exacerbated the problem. The first of the Ten Commandments seemed simple enough: No gods before me, and no graven images. Elsewhere in Hebrew scripture, however, apparently idolatrous practices seemed not merely to prevail but to have God's blessing. In Genesis 28, after waking from a particularly powerful dream, Jacob erected a sacred stone and poured oil on it. "Surely the Lord is in this place," he said, naming the place Bethel. "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Following the Exodus narrative, when the Israelites were punished in the desert by a plague of poisonous snakes, God instructed Moses to fashion a brass serpent, mount it on a pole, and tell the wounded to gaze on it reverently.⁴

Notwithstanding Joshua Thomas's fierce iconoclastic rhetoric, daily life on Tangier Island revealed a similarly more complex attitude to idolatry. When the British commandeered the island in 1812 as a base for attacks on the American mainland, soldiers began to clear the stands of wild cherry, pine, and cedar to built fortifications, encroaching on the grove that sheltered the island's famous camp meeting. Thomas begged the commanding admiral to spare the grove, explaining that his people hoped to resume revivals there when the war concluded. Given biblical precedent, this might have seemed an odd request. In the Old Testament, cutting down a grove was shorthand for fighting idolatry. Deuteronomy 16:21 clearly stated, "Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of any trees near unto the altar of the Lord thy God," and in II Kings 18, the reform-

⁴ Gen. 28:16–19; Num. 21:6–9.

minded King Hezekiah timbered the sacred groves linked with Canaanite goddess Asherah.^{5 6}

But Thomas didn't see it that way. Revivalism, like real estate, was about three things: location, location, location. The grove, he told the admiral, was his Bethel. "In this place," he said, "we have felt '*it was the very gate of heaven.*'"⁷ He toured the admiral around the camp, stopping at the ground in front of the preaching stand, called the "altar," reserved for penitents who had begun to experience a work of grace. As Thomas recalled, the admiral was so moved, he ordered that his men "should not cut *so much as a limb* off that grove."⁸ Stranger events followed. British soldiers reported hearing odd noises emanating from the grove, followed by "the sweetest and most melodious singing." They tracked the sounds to the area in front of the preaching stand, the place most powerfully associated with the cyclical descent of the Holy Spirit. For half an hour, the phantom chorus held the soldiers spellbound, hovering "about the tops of the trees." Feeling too wicked to sleep in "a spot so near heaven," they moved their tents to a respectful distance, sensing that "there must have been a great deal of preaching and praying in that place to make it as holy as they believed it to be." According to Thomas's biographer, from then

⁵ All biblical quotations are from the King James Version. Iconoclasm was considered important enough to H. & E. Phinney, the Cooperstown, New York, publishers of an 1844 edition of the Bible, that they devoted a full-page etching to the scene of "Josiah destroying the idols" from II Chronicles 34.

⁶ Holy Bible (Cooperstown, N.Y.: H & E. Phinney, 1844), 313.

⁷ Wallace, *Parson of the Islands*, 129. Italics in original.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 130. Italics in original.

on, the soldiers “never polluted the place” but “reverenced that ground, and would not desecrate it in any way, or pitch a tent in it, but on the outside of the sacred grove.”⁹

The enchanted woods of the Chesapeake offer good sightlines on the spiritual landscape of antebellum evangelicalism. For Thomas and other revivalists, the whole earth might be full of the glory of God, but some spots were more full than others. As Thomas’s biographer, Adam Wallace put it, “In this locality, the Ark seemed to rest.”¹⁰ As far as Thomas was concerned, what good Methodists did in the sacred grove was closer to Bethel and the brazen serpent than to the heathen worship of firewood or, for that matter, the May-poles, saints’ shrines, and healing wells of credulous Catholics. For anti-revivalists, however, the timbered piety of evangelicals offered an irresistible point of attack. Camp meetings were dubbed idolatrous innovations that corrupted rather than restored the primitive simplicity of worship described in the Old and New Testaments. Revivalism also violated Protestant notions of God’s universal presence in the works of creation. Christ resided not in any localized space but in the invisible body of the gathered elect, and his glory was revealed universally throughout the creation. Even within the camp, anxiety shadowed enthusiasm. Modeling themselves after Jacob at Bethel, Moses at the burning bush, or the disciples with Christ on Mount Tabor, antebellum evangelicals went about hallowing spaces and places in nature linked with the powerful presence of God, then wondered whether their acts of consecration might have abused rather than honored a means of grace by engaging in unholy forms of veneration.

This chapter explores the ways in which experiences of the natural world informed nineteenth-century evangelical practices of the “new birth,” the dramatic

⁹ Ibid., 131–2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 103.

spiritual transformation highly prized by the proponents of heart religion. Through practices such as field preaching, camp meetings, and outdoor baptism, large numbers of men and women sought salvation in the primitive simplicity of the natural world, what Calvin called the “theater of God’s glory.”¹¹ For evangelicals, nature was more than mere backdrop to the divine drama of salvation. Driven by primitivist and antiformalist sensibilities, antebellum believers layered fields, forests, and streams with allusions to biblical spaces and erected memorials to mark divine action, constructing a spiritual landscape that enhanced their distinctive practices and beliefs. This ritual activity, while authorized by scripture, also produced ambivalence, placing official Protestant opposition to “sacred localities” and the corresponding doctrine of the universal presence of God in creation in tension with utilitarian priorities and a tendency to hallow localized sites marked by the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit. Sensitive to accusations that outdoor worship had led to the illicit veneration of wood and stone, evangelicals interpreted their practices as a response to the presence of Christ in the natural world, a presence perceived through the regenerate senses of the “new man.” The *sensus spiritualis*, awakened in the moment of conversion, enabled believers to worship the divine in nature without fear of idolatry.¹²

¹¹ On Calvin’s view of nature, see Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1991).

¹² Origen is often cited by scholars as one of the earliest proponents of the Christian tradition of the spiritual senses. The following quote, from Origen’s *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 44, is a frequently cited text on the doctrine:

There is, as the scripture calls it, a certain generic divine sense, which only the man who is blessed finds on this earth. Thus Solomon says (Prov. 2:5): “Thou shalt find a divine sense.” There are many forms of this sense: a sight which can see things superior to corporeal beings, the cherubim or

Protestantism and the Disenchantment of the World

The contention that evangelical practices of the new birth put the iconoclastic impulses of Protestantism in tension with a drive to partial resanctification of the landscape complicates assertions of a Protestant-driven disenchantment of the world, a project that scholars argue won a crucial beachhead during the Reformation.¹³ A central piece of the Protestant assault on medieval devotional structures entailed a reworking of theological categories of divine presence. As Alexandra Walsham has written, Protestantism's "theoretical assault on the immanence of the holy and its campaign to evacuate the divine from the material universe" drew on a metaphysics that "radically reconstituted the boundaries between the spiritual and physical worlds, and undercut the edifice of incarnational mystery upon which the medieval system of the sacred rested."¹⁴ A repercussion of this metaphysics was the crusade against idols in the landscape—saints' shrines, sacred groves, healing wells, and the like. Protestants rejected the claim that God

seraphim being obvious instances, and a hearing which can receive impressions of sounds that have no objective existence in the air, and a taste which feeds on living bread that has come down from heaven and gives life to the world (John 6:33). So also there is a sense of smell which smells spiritual things, as Paul speaks of "a sweet savour of Christ unto God" (2 Cor. 2:15) and a sense of touch in accordance with which John says that he has handled with his hands "of the Word of life" (1 John 1:1).

¹³ For a recent historiographical assessment of scholarship on the Protestant Reformation and disenchantment, see Alexandra Walsham, "The Reformation and the Disenchantment of the World Reassessed," *The Historical Journal* 51.5 (2008), 497–528. See also Robert W. Scribner, "The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the 'Disenchantment of the World,'" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1993), 475–94; Scribner, "Reformation and Desacralisation: From Sacramental World to Moralised Universe," in R. Po-Chia Hsia and R. W. Scribner, eds., *Problems in the Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Europe* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1997), 75–92.

¹⁴ Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 151.

could be more fully present in particular substances—the consecrated bread and wine of communion, relics, holy water—as well as sites that had been specially sanctified to the memory of Christ, the saints, or the Virgin Mary. In so doing, Protestants potentially undercut the devotional implications of the Incarnation, challenging practices that focused on the spiritual sanctification of matter. God’s spirit resided not in any material object or structure, but in the invisible body of the elect wherever it gathered.

Nevertheless, reform brought unintended consequences. Those who emphasize the Reformation’s project of disenchantment, Walsham has argued, end up “eclipsing the curious and paradoxical side effects of this complex movement.” Noting the close interplay between patterns of destruction and preservation, she writes that Protestantism’s effort to excavate “sedimentary layers” of superstition, legend, and folklore from the landscape “simultaneously involved encrusting it with new ones.” The sacred, she continues, was “not so much eroded as reconfigured and relocated: the way in which it was present in the world was redefined rather than wholly denied.”¹⁵

This chapter extends Walsham’s arguments concerning sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain to the American landscape of the nineteenth century, a century often treated as a hinge of secularization, typically defined as a complex series of modern processes entailing the retreat of religion from public life and the gradual withering of religious belief and practice. The so-called “disenchantment of the world” has been considered a crucial dimension of the process of secularization by historians and sociologists, who have long disputed the precise meaning of disenchantment as well as the purported contribution of Protestantism to it. One influential line of scholarship, following the work of Max Weber, has stressed the role of early Protestant attacks on

¹⁵ Ibid.

magic and “superstition” as a spur to disenchantment, understood as a linear process of historical development.¹⁶ A number of recent studies, on the other hand, suggest a more fluid, contested set of relationships between nature and supernature. In the landscapes of antebellum revivalism, orthodoxy and idolatry were moving targets, complicated by the pragmatism and eclecticism of evangelical belief and practice, and the often-conflicting standards of worship and belief preserved in the biblical record. Evangelicals struggled in their own hearts to determine whether their practices of venerating rocks, groves, and streams touched by the presence of the spirit broached ancient prohibitions on idolatry or restored the primitive piety of the ancient Israelites and the early church.

Pragmatic Primitivism: Field Preaching, Itinerancy, and Antiformalist Tensions with Built Space

Ever since Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, Christians wanting devotional, theological, or institutional reform have taken their message outside the physical walls of the church. When proto-Protestant groups such as the Lollards and

¹⁶ The contemporary literature reassessing secularization is extensive. For the state of debates concerning the meaning of “disenchantment” in a Weberian sense and its influence on the historiography of secularization, see, Walsham, “The Reformation and the Disenchantment of the World Reassessed.” Influences on my own approach include Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007). One important recent development has been to treat secularization as social and cultural “contest” rather than a unidirectional “process.” See Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848–1914* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000); David Hempton, “Protestant Migrations: Narratives of the Rise and Decline of Religion in the North Atlantic World c. 1650–1950” in Callum Brown and Michael Snape, eds., *Secularization in the Christian World* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010), 41–56; David D. Hall, “Religion and Secularization in America: A Cultural Approach,” in Hartmut Lehmann, ed., *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung in neuzeitlichen Europa: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 118–130; and Christian Smith, ed., *Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Wycliffites took to the fields in the late Middle Ages to spread their message of reform, they appealed to powerful precedents in the gospels and the prophetic books of the Old Testament where prophets stepped out of the wilderness to protest corruptions in the temple cult. During the Middle Ages, church officials had often tolerated field preaching without sanctioning it. However, given the strong associations between outdoor worship and the “pagan” religions that Christianity supplanted, actual worship was restricted to indoor spaces. Early Protestants generally shared these concerns, equating outdoor preaching with unsanctioned and unscrupulous activity.¹⁷

It took the outbreak of evangelical revivalism in the early eighteenth to begin to reverse centuries of negative associations with outdoor worship. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Protestants had reformed worship space through architectural renovation and adaption: removing stained glass, sculptural ornamentation, and altars, increasing the size of pulpits and lecterns, and experimenting with the situation of pews. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, evangelical Protestants pushed the reformation of worship space in new directions, sometimes by substituting traditional church structures for private homes or meeting halls. The shift to outdoor worship spaces through practices such as field preaching, represented most dramatically in the 1740s revivals led by George Whitefield in Britain and America, was more radical still.

Like their precursors, evangelicals had eminently practical reasons for meeting in the outdoors. Often, itinerants preached in fields, groves, and brush arbors because it was

¹⁷ Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 218. There were exceptions, of course. As Keith Thomas notes, “In the reign of Edward VI the strongly Protestant curate of St Katherine Cree, London, forsook his pulpit and chose to preach out of a high elm tree in the churchyard.” Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 215.

often the only place they could avoid persecution by authorities. Even in cases when built space was available, sometimes it proved insufficient to shelter the crowds of listeners, many attracted by the sheer novelty of the event. Not all evangelical leaders embraced field preaching immediately. John Wesley, for instance, was initially repelled by the practice. After the success of Whitefield's transatlantic revivals, he changed course. Showing a pragmatism that characterized the evangelical movement more generally, Wesley began to preach in outdoor settings such as Gwennap amphitheatre, a naturally occurring pit in Cornwall.¹⁸

In America as in Britain, itinerants turned to natural spaces for shelter when local authorities denied them access to church space. The example of Christian Newcomer, a Methodist circuit rider, is typical. On being turned away from a local church, Newcomer preached "under the shelter of an oak tree and the canopy of heaven."¹⁹ What was true of itinerants was also true of lay gatherings. Baptist laywomen were sometimes forced, in the fashion of a conventicle, to meet for private worship in "some contiguous grove" or field.²⁰ African American slaves met in swamps and secluded brush arbors to avoid discovery and punishment by their owners.²¹

¹⁸ Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space*, 146.

¹⁹ Christian Newcomer, *The Life and Journal of the Rev.'d Christian Newcomer, Late Bishop of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, ed. John Hildt (Hagerstown, Md.: Printed by F. G. W. Kapp, 1834), 177.

²⁰ Janet Moore Lindman, *Bodies of Belief: Baptist Community in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 106.

²¹ On the tradition of the brush arbor, see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ch. 5; Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 8–12.

Soon enough, they made a virtue of necessity. The pragmatic utility of outdoor preaching cohered with theological commitments to primitivism and antiformalism. Revivalists linked formalism, the dread attachment to set liturgies and prayers purported to kill the spirit with the letter, to formal, built worship space.²² By excluding evangelicals from built worship space, opponents added fuel to charges of formalism and declension against the standing order. Gesturing with one arm to the comfortable and well-attired local church or meeting house, evangelicals reworked the old biblical saw that “grass and trees were more lively reminders of the Creator than any man-made idol.” Paraphrasing the Acts of the Apostles, others averred that God was more present in a grassy common filled with earnest seekers than in any staid temple made by human hands.²³ By reinvigorating the antiformalist tensions with built space that had flowered during the Reformation and linking their often-unruly gatherings with auspicious biblical models, evangelicals reversed the argument for the spiritual superiority of built space. Lively worship was more likely than not to be found in God’s own temple.

Joshua Thomas offers one example of how primitivist and antiformalist tensions could easily spill over into a rhetorical assault on built space. Thomas recalled watching a

²² On antiformalism, see Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space*, esp. chapter 6; Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). On the role of primitivism in American religion, see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); and Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, eds., *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

²³ Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 237. Keith Thomas notes that “In 1429 the Lollard Robert Cavell, a clergyman of Bungay, maintained that no honour was due to images, but that trees were of greater vigour and virtue and fitter to be worshipped than stone or dead wood carved in the shape of a man.” Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 215.

Methodist itinerant draw an entire congregation outside the church by preaching under a nearby oak. “Roaring like a lion,” Thomas said, the preacher “tore the Church all to *shivers*,” a rhetorical assault that echoed his address to the departing missionaries concerning his island boys’ eagerness to stone false gods. Thomas’ story concluded with an old woman who cried out, “I will serve the living God,” a declaration that linked the physical shift from built to natural space with an inner movement from dead formalism to living piety.²⁴

Evangelicals commonly invoked the witness and ministry of a vitalized creation in their attacks on formalism. “Methodist and Formalist,” a popular early nineteenth-century song, paraphrased Jesus’ admonition by envisioning a livid creation rising in revolt against the calcified piety of formalist worship.²⁵

For Scripture collation in this dispensation,
The blessed Redeemer has handed it out—
“If these cease from praising,” we hear him there saying,
“The stones to reprove them would quickly cry out.”²⁶

The practice of taking nature as a witness of one’s covenant with Christ had transatlantic parallels. Following communion in her local church, Janet Pollock, a nineteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian, took her children and went out

into a wood, and ther I covenanted away with my self, my bairns and theirs, to all generations, that would adhere to it, to God, in Christ; and took the place I was sitting in, and the trees, and the heavens, and the angells, and God himself, that kneu me, and my heart, witnesses, that we should be for Him and not for another.²⁷

²⁴ Wallace, *Parson of the Islands*, 85.

²⁵ Luke 19:40: “And he answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.”

²⁶ Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting: Religion’s Harvest Time* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955), Appendix III.

Pollock's case also illustrates how antiformalist tensions inherent in outdoor devotional practices could be harnessed to support rather than undercut communal worship in built space. Pollock's covenant before and with nature reinforced the existing covenant with her Presbyterian neighbors.

The camp meeting, a model of communal, sacramental piety imported from Scottish Calvinism, extended the antiformalist and primitivist tensions with built worship space.²⁸ On the frontier, camp meetings typically offered the only available environment for worship. In such cases, it offered not rivalry with built church space but a path to institutionalization. In more settled areas, however, the camp meeting typically worked a dialectic with formal church space, encouraging periodic cycles of retreat and renewal by turning from "worldly concerns" to the "shades of the wilderness."²⁹ It was common for evangelicals to appeal to the advantages of natural environments in hastening the work of spiritual reform, rather than viewing them simply as pragmatic solutions to a lack of built worship space. Writing in *Zion's Herald* in 1824, one observer reported, "In the stillness of

²⁷ Robert Wodrow, *Analecta: or, Materials for a History of Remarkable Providences; Mostly Relating to Scottish Ministers and Christians*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: printed for the Maitland Club, 1842–3), I: 79.

²⁸ On the history of the camp meeting, see Leigh E. Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmann, 2001); Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *Triumph of the Laity: Scots-Irish Piety and the Great Awakening, 1652–1760* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). On the sacramental character of the Methodist camp-meeting tradition, see Steven D. Cooley, "Manna and the Manual: Sacramental and Instrumental Constructions of the Victorian Methodist Camp Meeting during the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 6 (Summer 1996): 131–160; Russell E. Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800–1845* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974); and J. B. Jackson, "The Sacred Grove in America," in *The Necessity for Ruins* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 77–88.

²⁹ The cyclical tension between activism (evangelism and service) and periodic retreat into nature for refreshment and contemplation of God is addressed in the second chapter.

the forest and in the retirement of nature, it is well known, from experience, that religious discourses often make the most lasting impression upon the human heart.”³⁰ Strictly speaking, wilderness might represent an interior condition, but as David R. Williams argues, a Congregationalist such as Mary Moody Emerson, aunt to Ralph Waldo, was “not immune to the temptation to believe that the physical creation was more than just a symbol of the invisible world, that the presence of the body in a literal wilderness, while not the same thing as conversion, might be a helpful prerequisite for conversion.”³¹

Preachers amplified the dramatic effect of natural surroundings by preaching on texts laden with emblems from the natural world, such as the tree of life. Francis Asbury preached frequently on earthy parables such as the fig tree and the sower.³² When the frontier Baptist farmer-preacher John Taylor addressed a “great number of people” gathered in a wood in Tygart Valley, Virginia, he chose the text, “the axe is laid to the

³⁰ *Zion's Herald* 1824 2:35 (Aug. 25, 1824). Later in the century, such sentiments were amplified in nostalgic histories of the camp-meeting movement. Methodist Bishop Matthew Simpson noted how, in the naturalistic setting of the camp meeting,

devotion becomes more earnest and intense, the soul seems to gain a higher altitude, broader thoughts flash upon the mind, and, from Nature's holy temples covered only by the canopy of heaven, the soul seems to mount upward and commune with God.

Alexander McLean and J. W. Eaton, eds., *Penuel; or, Face to Face with God* (New York: W. C. Palmer, Jr., 1869), xvii.)

³¹ David R. Williams, “The Wilderness Rapture of Mary Moody Emerson: One Calvinist Link to Transcendentalism,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1986), 6. On the spirituality of Mary Moody Emerson, see Phyllis Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³² See, for instance, Francis Asbury, *Journal of Rev. Francis Asbury*, Vol. I (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1786), 60, 461.

root of the trees, and every tree that bringeth not good fruit, is hewn down and cast into the fire.”³³

The widespread adoption of practices of itinerancy, field preaching, and camp meetings, underwritten by antiformalist and primitivist attack on temples made with human hands, remapped spiritual space in the early republic. In Britain and Europe, “holy oaks” had for centuries reinforced the parochial structure of the established church by marking the boundaries of the local parish. Ritual life reinscribed these boundaries on the landscape during rogation days, when the congregation, led by a priest, processed around the perimeters of the parish. As Keith Thomas writes, “The annual parish perambulation picked its way from one tree to another, pausing to read the scriptures at some ‘gospel oak’ or ‘holy oak.’ Such trees were older than any of the inhabitants; and they symbolized the community’s continued existence.”³⁴

The ritual employment of trees by evangelicals differed dramatically. While the holy oak marked the periphery or outer boundaries of parochial space, gospel trees that sheltered itinerant preachers occupied the center of ritual space, providing a living axis around which the ephemeral congregation could gather. In some cases, the close identification between trees and itinerancy worked to undercut parish boundaries themselves. As itinerants transgressed parish boundaries to preach in the shelter of a favored tree or grove, they reinforced the rejection of formalism and declension in favor of a primitive piety that expressed itself in outdoors settings that were transitory and radically contingent rather than in staid temples that evoked continuity and permanence.

³³ John Taylor, *A History of Ten Baptist Churches* (Frankfort, Ky.: J. H. Holeman, 1823), 24.

³⁴ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 216.

The end at which all field preaching and camp meetings aimed was conversion, the dramatic turning of the heart to God through a flexible morphology of awakening and conviction of sin, spiritual struggle and repentance, culminating in the assurance of sins forgiven. For earnest seekers, natural environments not only offered space for reflection. By layering the landscape with allusions to biblical holy spaces, they fused the books of nature and scripture, constructing a spiritual landscape that assimilated their experience to biblical models and mediated the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Nature as Place in the Morphology of Evangelical Conversion

One Sunday morning in 1768, William Glendinning was walking in the yard of a Presbyterian meetinghouse in Baltimore waiting for the service to begin, when, he wrote, “the earth and all the elements were represented to me...in a flame of fire.” This was the third time that the tailor had seen the “dreadful reality.” It was always on the Sabbath and always in natural surroundings. The first occurred when Glendinning was a teenager living in Scotland. Having just finished reading Bunyan’s *Holy War*, he was walking in a field and had just got in among some “fine trees” when the landscape erupted in a blaze. Glendinning fell to his knees, read his scriptures, and prayed. While engaged in these “exercises,” he wrote, “I felt myself so overwhelmed with the power, presence, and love of God...that I was willing to die, to be with the Lord.”³⁵

While living in Baltimore, Glendinning fell in with some Methodists. After a meeting one night, he retired to the fields, humbled himself in prayer, and felt the stone of sin roll away. Glendinning put himself forward as a circuit preacher in Maryland, but

³⁵ William Glendinning, *The Life of William Glendinning, Preacher of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Printed for the author at the office of W.W. Woodward, 1795), 4.

afflicted by doubt and insomnia, he abandoned his circuit, twice wading into a swamp to end his life at the edge of a razor. Unable to pray or read the Bible, he somehow managed to retain his daily practice of walking in the fields. One day while so engaged, he encountered Lucifer face to face, his eyes and mouth as “red as blood.” Glendinning turned hermit, setting up in a remote cabin to battle his demon. Every day for four years, in snow or sunshine, he would walk barefoot to some “secret places of the fields” and cry for mercy.³⁶

He soon found himself returning to one area in particular, a “little rising ground” near a creek. “This spot of earth seemed to be sacred to me, and made as a mount of safety to me,” Glendinning wrote. “I used to call it *my mount*, or the *Mount of Olives*.” One midnight, Lucifer came within a few feet of him, but Glendinning stood his ground and commanded him to depart in the name of God. Lucifer shrank away with his attendants, and Glendinning saw him no more.³⁷ After the showdown on the mount, Glendinning’s misery abated. “I began to have some of my former feelings of nature given back to me,” he wrote.³⁸ He resumed his practice of peregrinating prayer in a local landscape now littered with scriptural landmarks and spiritual touchstones.

While Glendinning’s case was in many respects exceptional, it nevertheless points up a significant feature of evangelical practices of nature pertaining to the new birth: by

³⁶ Ibid., 31.

³⁷ Ibid., 35. Italics in original. Christine Leigh Heyrman has written memorably on how Glendinning and other early nineteenth-century evangelicals faced opposition in the South for their proclivity for “raising the devil.” See Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 28–33. For instances of Puritan encounters with the devil a century earlier, see David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

³⁸ Glendinning, 31.

layering natural objects or locations with allusions to biblical places, evangelicals wrought typological linkages between the books of nature and scripture. These personal linkages served specific stages in the morphology of conversion. The Baltimore churchyard, for instance, in which Glendinning had a vision of the earth and all the elements consumed in fire, evoked Moses' fearful encounter with the burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai. It also carried resonances of a state of future punishment, the fiery hell described in Christ's parable of the rich man who awoke in torment. Both allusions worked to awaken Glendinning to his need of salvation and deepen his sense of conviction. The "blessed mount" on which Glendinning later waged his daily struggle with Satan functioned in the succeeding morphological stage, sustained spiritual struggle. His mount bore several other layers of scriptural sediment: it invoked the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, where Jesus endured a night of spiritual struggle before the crucifixion, and the Judean desert, where he endured forty days of temptation by Satan. Glendinning merged scriptural space with places in the natural landscape where the supernatural touched his life, hallowing it in experience and memory.

The first stages in the evangelical morphology of conversion involved awakening to one's need of salvation and coming under a sense of conviction. Puritanism offered precedents for Glendinning's "exercises" of walking in nature while engaging in the preparation of the heart for a work of grace. In Puritan piety, the natural landscape was read as a type of the wilderness endured by the Israelites. Thomas Shepard, the Puritan minister of Cambridge, described how, "Walking in the fields...the Lord did help me to loathe myself."³⁹ Glendinning may have found a more contemporary model in the diary

³⁹ Quoted in Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 17.

of David Brainerd, the celebrated eighteenth-century missionary to Native Americans. The published account of Brainerd's diary, edited by Jonathan Edwards, captured his arduous struggle for salvation in gripping detail, a struggle that occurred almost entirely in natural surroundings. Brainerd described walking often "in the same solitary place," a "dark, thick grove" where "I was brought to see myself lost and helpless." In a "mournful, melancholy state," he attempted to pray but soon despaired, "as if there was nothing in heaven or earth could make me happy."⁴⁰

The pattern of retreating to the woods under a state of conviction appears repeatedly in conversion narratives among evangelicals of every stripe. While enrolled at Middlebury College, Levi Parsons, who was inspired by David Brainerd to join one of the first Protestant missions to Palestine, patterned his devotional habits on those of his hero. "After prayers in the chapel," he wrote, "I took my Bible, and retired to a grove west of the college." As he walked, he fixed on the scriptural passage, "O Israel thou has destroyed thyself," until, "wearied and distressed," he sat down on a log and "contemplated the mysteries of hell."⁴¹ Charles Grandison Finney may have similarly modeled his conversion narrative directly on Brainerd's account of struggle in the "dark, thick grove." One fresh morning in October 1821, Finney turned into a piece of woods that he was in the habit of walking, determined, he wrote, to "give my heart to God that day or die in the attempt."⁴² When Benjamin Abbott arrived too early at a neighbor's

⁴⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 69.

⁴¹ Levi Parsons, *Memoir of the Rev. Levi Parsons, Late Missionary to Palestine*, compiled by Daniel O. Morton (Poultney, Vt.: Smith & Shute, 1824; reprint, New York: Arno, 1977), 18.

house for a Methodist meeting. He retired to the woods to pray, and “got in among the boughs of a fallen tree, and then in the utmost anguish of my soul I cried unto God for mercy, so loud, that the people at the house heard me.”⁴³ As the Baptist Enoch Edwards was walking home from Philadelphia, he “found himself overtaken by spiritual pain and retired to a grove of woods to pray.”⁴⁴ If evangelicals disagreed over how to parse the stages of conversion or the relative contributions of divine and human agency, none disputed that the experience of surrounding or losing oneself in a literal wilderness could powerfully augment feelings of isolation and despair that helped to prepare the heart for spiritual deliverance.

In the case of camp meetings, those who sought to escape from the din of the camp into the seclusion of the woods did not always find privacy. On a cold, rainy night on the frontier in Oregon territory, the Methodist missionary H. K. W. Perkins

walked out to find a retired spot, where I might give vent to the feelings of my soul; but this was impossible without travelling a long distance, for the rocks and prairie for half a mile around rang with prayer. I should judge there were fifty engaged in such wrestling, that the sound might have been heard afar off—their secret chamber, nature’s own temple.⁴⁵

⁴² Charles Grandison Finney, *Memoirs of Reverend Charles G. Finney Written By Himself* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1876), 13–23. Charles Hambrick-Stowe notes that Brainerd’s language “foreshadows Finney’s in amazing detail. See Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 17. Norman Pettit makes a similar observation in his introduction to the Yale edition of the *Life of David Brainerd*.

⁴³ Benjamin Abbott, *The Experience, and Gospel Labours, of the Rev. Benjamin Abbott* (New York: Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, for the Methodist Connection in the United States, 1813), 16. Abbott went on to become a Methodist itinerant in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Lindman, *Bodies of Belief*, 59.

⁴⁵ H. K. W. Perkins, *Wonderful Work of God among the Indians of the Oregon Territory* (New York: Published for the Tract Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1840), 137.

Seeking contact with the divine presence in naturalistic spaces did not depend on physical isolation or on the pretense of discovering a literal wilderness untainted by human civilization. Like early monasticism, the camp meeting became a city in the desert.

Providential interventions mediated by the natural world could deepen one's sense of conviction, or awaken one to the presence of invisible powers battling for the soul. In June 1784, while Francis Asbury was praying among four hundred people in a grove of sycamores, a limb suddenly fell into the midst of the crowd without injuring anyone. "Some thought it was a trick of the devil," wrote Asbury. "And so indeed it might have been. Perhaps he wanted to kill another, who spoke after me with great power."⁴⁶ Joshua Thomas claimed that the devil once "hurled a knot of pine wood" at his head to keep him from finding religion. On another occasion, Thomas led a camp meeting in the midst of a tempest, which destroyed the surrounding trees but didn't harm a single tent in the grove, which Thomas interpreted as a sign of divine blessing.⁴⁷

As well as provoking or deepening a state of conviction in the penitent, providential acts of nature frequently announced or accompanied the moment of deliverance from spiritual struggle. A lightning storm offered auspicious meteorological conditions, furnishing sensible images of divine wrath and the brevity of human life.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Asbury, *Journal of Francis Asbury* I, 474.

⁴⁷ Wallace, *Parson of the Islands*, 92.

⁴⁸ Similar patterns prevailed in practice among British evangelicals. In 1734, George Whitefield retired to a tree-lined meadow in Oxford, where he "continued in silent prayer under one of the trees for near two hours, sometimes lying flat on my face...the night being stormy, it gave me awful thoughts of the day of judgement." Luke Tylerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield*, Vol. 1 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), 22. In *Man and the Natural World*, Keith Thomas quotes this scene as evidence of an "older, more fearful attitude" to trees that was already making way for the emerging romantic "worship of trees," which viewed them as "valued sources of pleasure and inspiration."

After coming under conviction, Christian Newcomer ran out of his house into the yard and fell to his knees, determined to give himself to God. Lightning struck nearby. “O! What a clap!” Newcomer later recalled. “As it ceased, the whole anguish of my soul was removed; I did not know what had happened unto me, my heart felt glad, my soul was happy.”⁴⁹ Subtler messages telegraphed by nature could be just as resonant. Immediately following his conversion, Thomas ran through a neighbor’s cornfield, “leaping and praising God.” His wife worried he’d destroy the crop. On examination, however, the neighbor determined that Thomas hadn’t “trodden down a single hill, or broken one stalk,” a miracle that authenticated Thomas’s regeneration and intimated a restored state of harmony between humanity and the natural world that gestured back to Eden and foreshadowed the millennium.⁵⁰

Conversion and the Spiritual Sense of Nature

When deliverance finally dawned for David Brainerd in the “dark thick grove,” it was accompanied by a new and fresh perception of reality. After wrestling under conviction for hours, Brainerd gazed out on a “new world”: “unspeakable glory seemed

Apart from the fact that Whitefield says nothing in the quoted passage about trees being fearful (his fear centers on the raging storm), Thomas’s negative judgment of Whitefield fits a larger historiographical habit of presenting evangelicals as reactionary foils in an age moving progressively toward more positive associations with nature, developments that culminate in English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. As if to drive home the link between evangelical decline and the rise of nature worship, Thomas’s narrative culminates in the writings of John Ruskin, a disenchanting evangelical. For more on the theme of meditation on death and the Last Days through meditation on the natural world, see chapter 4.

⁴⁹ Newcomer, *Life and Journal of Christian Newcomer*, 4.

⁵⁰ Wallace, *Parson of the Islands*, 92.

to open to the view and apprehension of my soul.”⁵¹ As William James observed more than a century ago in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a peculiarity of what he called the “assurance state” is “the objective change which the world often appears to undergo: ‘An appearance of newness beautifies every object.’”⁵² In particular, this sense of newness applied to objects in the natural world. Like his friend Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards described how, following his own conversion,

my sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of everything had altered: there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. And scarce anything, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning; formerly nothing had been so terrible to me. Before, I used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder, and to be struck when with terror when I saw a thunderstorm rising; but now, on the contrary, it rejoices me.⁵³

Brainerd and Edwards’s awareness of a spiritual sense of nature awakened at the moment of salvation is a recurrent feature of antebellum conversion narratives. Like many converts, the first thing Benjamin Abbott noticed was that the world looked different to him than it did before. It was as if his sensory organs had been cleansed, allowing a new mode of perception. “It appeared to me,” he wrote, “that the whole creation was praising God; it also appeared as if I had got new eyes, for every thing

⁵¹ Edwards, *Life of David Brainerd*, 69.

⁵² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 201–2.

⁵³ Jonathan Edwards, “Personal Narrative,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 16 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 793–794. Roland Delattre’s *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) helped to stimulate interest in Edwards’s emphasis on desire for God’s beauty.

appeared new, and I felt a love for all the creatures that God had made, and an uninterrupted peace filled my breast.”⁵⁴ The awakening of a spiritual sense of the natural world became close to a ubiquitous feature of the evangelical conversion narrative, testifying to the authenticity of religious experience. Martha Louks, a Methodist, was typical in her description: after her conversion, she wrote, “I went out, and the birds, and every thing praised God.”⁵⁵ When Christian Newcomer awoke the morning after experiencing a work of saving grace, “all nature had in my eyes put on a different appearance—all things had become new, and I was enabled to rejoice all the day long.”⁵⁶ Jacob Bower, a frontier preacher born to German Baptist parents in Pennsylvania and converted in Kentucky, went outside to find that everything “appeared intierly new. The trees (I thought) lifted their hands up toards Heaven as if they were praising God. I cast my eyes upward, and beheld the bright twinkling stars shining to their makers praise. They appeared as so many holes through which I could look & see the glory of Heaven.”⁵⁷ Catherine Livingston Garrettson took a walk in the garden, where she saw “the hand of love” in every flower.⁵⁸ Peter Cartwright, a convert of the famous Kentucky revivals led by Presbyterian James McGready, opened his eyes and thought he was

⁵⁴ Abbott, *The Experience, and Gospel Labours, of Benjamin Abbott*, 45.

⁵⁵ “The Experience of Martha Louks, taken from her own words, July 27, 1817,” in William Pitts, *The Gospel Witness: Containing Evidence that the Holy Spirit Is Given to All that Believe* (Catskill, N.Y.: Printed for the author by Junius S. Lewis, 1818), 167.

⁵⁶ Newcomer, *Life and Journal of Christian Newcomer*, 4.

⁵⁷ “Autobiography of Jacob Bower,” in William Warren Sweet, ed. *Religion on the American Frontier, Vol. 1, The Baptists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 193.

⁵⁸ Diane Helen Lobody, “Lost in the Ocean of Love: The Mystical Writings of Catherine Livingston Garrettson,” doctoral dissertation, Drew University, 1990, 49.

already in heaven: “the trees, the leaves on them, and every thing seemed, and I really thought were, praising God.”⁵⁹

Adam Wallace, the biographer of Joshua Thomas, elaborated on this doctrine of sensory transfiguration:

The sensations of a soul, after its transition from darkness and doubt, into the light of God’s reconciled face,—when it looks out on nature,—the trees, and fields, the stars above reflected in the dancing water, and the objects of a diversified landscape,—all are new, peculiar, and glorious! Every leaf seems to convey a lesson of love; every flower, a fresh ingredient in the flowing cup of joy; and sea and sky seem to be in happy harmony with the enthralled spirit.⁶⁰

Wallace tempered his exuberance. Just as in Cartwright’s narrative, where all things “seemed” to be praising God, Wallace wrote that each leaf “seems” to teach lessons of love. Jacob Bower also struck a tentative note, admitting that he “thought” he saw the trees reaching up their hands to heaven. In some cases, this reticence was provoked by an awareness of the transitory or ephemeral nature of the experience.

⁵⁹ Peter Cartwright, *The Backwoods Preacher: An Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (London: Alexander Heylin, 1858), 13. The experience of Methodist itinerant Benjamin Lakin furnishes another example. Following his conversion in September 1795, Lakin wrote in his journal that, “Everything appeared to look of a heavenly nature. I seem’d emty of all things and fill’d with God.” “The Journal of Benjamin Lakin,” in William Warren Sweet, ed., *Religion on the American Frontier, Vol. 4, The Methodists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 211.

⁶⁰ Wallace, *Parson of the Islands*, 103. John Wesley Childs’s biographer described his 1816 conversion to Methodism using language identical to that of Wallace:

The evidence of [Childs’s] conversion was full and complete. Nature around him seemed to have put on a garb of unwonted loveliness. The forests and the skies, the sunshine and the flowers, the faces of those who rejoiced over his conversion, and all the objects on every hand, seemed to glow with an expression of praise to the great and good Creator of all. John Ellis Edwards, *Life of John Wesley Childs: For Twenty-three Years an Itinerant Methodist Minister* (Richmond and Louisville: John Early, 1852), 37–8.

Christian Newcomer unhappily admitted that the new sense of things inaugurated by the lightning strike was not for him a permanent condition. “For some time I continued in this state of mind,” he wrote. Yet, “by degrees I perceived an alternation in my mind.”⁶¹ The sense of freshness could gradually grow stale.

Sensitivity to the fluctuating and impermanent nature of powerful spiritual feelings and states was one reason that evangelicals policed their claims about the spiritual sense of nature. A second, related reason connected to concerns over enthusiasm. David Brainerd’s account of the spiritual sense distinguished carefully between the common and spiritual senses. Brainerd quickly excluded the possibility that his vision of unspeakable glory was a report of his bodily eyes—it was not “any external brightness,” he wrote, “for I saw no such thing.” That left a few possibilities. Either it was a vision or an apparition, an “imagination of a body of light...somewhere in the third heavens,” or an “inward apprehension” of the divine.⁶²

Brainerd’s reluctance to claim unmediated sensory access to the sovereign of the universe characterized Reformed spirituality more generally. A predilection for parsing out religious experience pertained even among converts to Methodism. The visions of early American Methodist William Glendinning reveal the grammar of a lapsed Scottish Presbyterian. Ensclosed on his “blessed *Mount*,” Glendinning received visions of heavenly transport that echoed Paul’s rapture to the third heaven.⁶³ “The mansions of bliss and

⁶¹ Newcomer, *Life and Journal of Christian Newcomer*, 4.

⁶² Edwards, *Life of David Brainerd*, 69.

⁶³ 2 Corinthians 2:2–4: “I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”

happiness were opened to my mind,” he wrote. Such visions, he quickly clarified, were received “not with my bodily eyes” but by “the view of my mind.”⁶⁴ The distinction here between a report of the physical faculty (the “bodily eyes”) and a mental impression (“the view of my mind”), goes back to the writings of Augustine, for whom perception by spiritual faculties takes place through the “eye of the mind” or the “inner eye.”⁶⁵

Glendinning was certain that experimental religion had given him a fresh sense of things. Where he and many evangelicals had less confidence was in stating whether this freshness reflected an objective reality, long veiled from the gross senses by the deleterious effects of the fall, or a subjective sensibility, inspired by a higher form of sight.

This Reformed predilection to hedge the radical potential of spiritual sight, paid in part by a philosophical allegiance to Idealism, strong affirmation of human depravity, and wariness of enthusiasm, would attenuate as the center of gravity in evangelicalism drifted from the careful theological parsings of scholarly Edwardseans toward the more earthly, pragmatic spirit of Methodism. The conversion account of Jeremiah Minter, published in 1817, shows little concern for distinguishing between common and spiritual senses, between signs and wonders telegraphs through nature and “inward apprehensions” of the divine. Minter was alone in his father’s orchard when he experienced his first dramatic revelation of Christ’s “pardoning love.” He prayed for a sign. Looking up, he wrote, “there appeared a small circular place in the sky more luminous than the rest, which much increased my assurance that God had answered my

⁶⁴ Glendinning, *Life of William Glendinning*, 40.

⁶⁵ Mark McInroy, “Perceiving Splendor: The ‘Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses’ in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics,” doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 2009, 46.

prayers.”⁶⁶ Minter, who served as a Methodist itinerant in East Virginia until being excommunicated for castrating himself following a literal interpretation of Matthew 19:12, seems never to have worried that he might be taking matters too far.⁶⁷ The greater sin, to his mind, was not to take them far enough.

Minter left Methodism unwillingly. But even those who passed through evangelicalism on their way to founding new religious movements often could not help but imbibe some of its most characteristic practices of nature. The early religious experience of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, was impressed with the strategies and patterns of revivalist conversion. In the early 1820s, Smith retreated to a wood on the Smith family farm in Palmyra, New York, to pray. In what Mormons now call the “sacred grove,” Smith received what became known as the First Vision, the first of a series of new revelations that culminated in the restoration of the Aaronic priesthood and the establishment of the Mormon faith. In an early account, however, written in 1832, Smith interpreted the vision in terms that would have been familiar to any of his neighbors in the heart of the burned-over district, as a personal conversion.⁶⁸ As he recalled,

⁶⁶ Jeremiah Minter, *A brief account of the religious experiences, travels, preaching persecutions from evil men, and God's special helps in the faith and life, &c. of Jerem. Minter* (Washington: Printed for the Author, 1817), 5–6.

⁶⁷ “For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother’s womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.”

⁶⁸ Smith’s practice followed familial patterns. Before Joseph Smith was born, his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, had withdrawn to the woods in Vermont to pray over her husband’s disavowal of evangelical religion. See Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 39.

a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way walk in my statutes and keep my commandments.⁶⁹

In the later 1830s, he revised his story. As Richard Bushman observes, the emphasis in the story shifted from “personal forgiveness” to “the apostacy of the churches.” Rather than seeking conversion, his reason for going to the woods now turned on a dilemma over which church to join, a revision that suggests a growing awareness in the late 1830s of Smith’s revelatory and restorationist mission.⁷⁰

“Winter Soldiers Never Flee”: The Case of Outdoor Baptism

Evangelicals were deeply divided over the proper mode of baptism authorized by scripture. Those who endorsed the practice of baptizing only professing adults, and only by full immersion, viewed such a mode as a quintessential case for the supremacy of primitive outdoor worship over dead formalist tradition. Like the defenders of the camp meeting who invoked precedents such as the wilderness Tabernacle, Baptists and Campbellites defended the practice of “dipping” by claiming they were simply following the pattern established by Christ. Outdoor baptisms were public events, attracting many curious onlookers. Morgan Edwards, a Welsh Baptist, church historian, and pastor, claimed to have seen as many as thirty-two carriages and up to a thousand spectators

⁶⁹ Quoted in Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 39.

⁷⁰ Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 39–40. The sacred grove has become a major site of pilgrimage for contemporary Latter-day Saints. An interesting side note: Smith and his family likely cut down most of the grove in the years after his vision, a story that suggests the danger of treating sacramental and instrumental approaches to nature as mutually exclusive. We do better to think of an accommodation.

thronging to witness a dipping in the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia.⁷¹ As Janet Moore Lindman has argued, “The performance of religious ritual out-of-doors extended the reach and power of Baptists beyond the meeting house while also sacralizing the physical world.”⁷²

Even considering the energy that Baptists devoted to attacking improper modes of baptism (sprinkling, pedobaptism), it is still surprising to find so few articles in Baptist journals and newspapers that explicitly discuss or defend the proper setting for the rite. Perhaps it was taken for granted. Fortunately, liturgy and hymnody fill some evidentiary gaps. Proposition 27 of Baptist church doctrine stated the desired manner of baptism, “Performing it in rivers and places of much water,” citing Matthew 6:6 and John 3:23 in support.⁷³ An early nineteenth-century Baptist hymn invoked the bridal language of the Song of Songs and depicted the rite as a riverside wedding:

In pleasure sweet here do we meet
Down by the water side,
And here we stand by Christ’s command,
To wait upon his bride.⁷⁴

Like all outdoor ceremonies, dipping was contingent on weather and climate. While camp meetings were typically held only during the months of summer or autumn, baptisms were conducted all year round. In northern landscapes, a winter baptism could be a harrowing, even life-threatening, ordeal. Helpers cut through ice often more than a

⁷¹ Morgan Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the American Baptists* (Philadelphia: Printed by Edward Steuart, 1768), 130.

⁷² Lindman, *Bodies of Belief*, 77.

⁷³ Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the American Baptists*, 81.

⁷⁴ Joshua Smith and Samuel Sleeper, *Divine Hymns, or Spiritual Songs* (Portland: Thomas Clark, 1803), 32. An early Separatist Baptist hymnal, Smith and Sleeper’s collection was a major source text for Jeremiah Ingalls’s *The Christian Harmony* (1805).

foot thick, carving a rectangular hole the size of a grave.⁷⁵ On more than one occasion, the ritual of sharing Christ's death proved literal. Baptists turned the danger into a bold demonstration of love for Christ, a form of taking up the cross. One hymn, which told initiates to "never fear the frozen stream" and dared them to become "winter soldiers," reads almost as a magical incantation against harm:

Christians, if your hearts be warm,
Ice and snow can do no harm;
If by Jesus you are priz'd,
Rise, believe and be baptis'd.

Jesus drank the gall for you,
Bore the curse to mortals due;
Children prove your love to him,
Never fear the frozen stream.

Never shun the Saviour's cross,
All on earth is worthless dross;
If you Saviour's love you feel,
Let the world behold your zeal.

Fire is good to warm the soul,
Water purifies the soul
Fire and water both agree,
Winter soldiers never flee.⁷⁶

Baptist liturgy led initiates and congregants alike in a re-enactment of Christ's baptism that mingled American waters with those of the Holy Land. Leaving a space for the minister to insert the name of the local stream or river, one order of service encouraged witnesses to read their local tributary as a type of the biblical Jordan: "Thou that didst come from Galilee to Jordan come now also from heaven to _____ and

⁷⁵ Lindman, *Bodies of Belief*, 76.

⁷⁶ Smith and Sleeper, *Divine Hymns, or Spiritual Songs*, 89.

meet us on the banks of this river.”⁷⁷ Perhaps sensing the theological tangle raised by such acts of sacralization, the liturgy acknowledged a tension between the Protestant principle of God’s universal presence in creation and the biblical predilection for allocating a special portion of divine presence to specific times and places:

We know thou art present every where but ah! let it not be here as at the first on the banks of the banks of Jordan when thou didst stand among the crowd, and they knew it not! O let us find the messiah here! Thou that comest by water, and art witnessed to of the water come by this water.⁷⁸

As much as they sought to worship a sovereign God unbounded by space and time, evangelicals found it not merely impossible but also undesirable to avoid the implications of the Incarnation, that God had come in the flesh and dwelt among us and remained there even now through the enlivening presence of the Holy Spirit.

Following the baptism, the reenactment of the gospel narrative continued, with the presiding minister functioning almost as a stage director in the divine drama. The minister asked Christ to “open a window in yonder heaven, and let our beloved show himself through the lattices,” to call the newly baptized “thy beloved son,” to say “thou are well pleased with him,” and “to send the dove of the Holy Spirit on him as he prepares to go into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”⁷⁹ By encouraging believers to imaginatively place themselves in biblical scenes and sites, Baptist liturgy sanctified local landscapes through experiences that linked them with sacred precedent.

For Baptists, sentimental attachments to rivers ran deep. Among Pennsylvania Baptists, the Schuylkill River was accorded special reverence. Writing in 1768, Morgan Edwards described a stretch of river about a mile and a half north of the city that was

⁷⁷ Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the American Baptists*, 81.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 82–3.

appreciated not only for its ritual utility but also for its aesthetic qualities.⁸⁰ The place, Edwards wrote, was “not only convenient for the celebration of baptism but most delightful for rural sceneries.... Round said spot are large oak, affording fine shade. Underfoot, is a green, variegated with wild flowers and aromatic herbs.”⁸¹ Citing the account of Christ’s Transfiguration, Edwards suggested that the combination of delightful scenery and transformative experience had sanctified the waters of the Schuylkill. “With these exercises of religion and the delightfulness of the place many confess to have had such feelings as the disciples when they said, *Lord, it is good for us to be here! Let us here erect tabernacles!*”⁸²

Edwards believed the Schuylkill deserved special recognition for its popularity as a setting for baptism. Invoking two rivers from his native Wales renowned among Welsh Baptists, he asked, “Why should not the Schuylkill be mentioned with Jordan, Swale, and Gwennie, seeing there is a like reason for it?” Edwards’s devotion may have even led him to write a special hymn in the river’s honor.⁸³ Like Baptist liturgy, the “Schuylkill hymn”

⁸⁰ On attempts to enshrine the Schuylkill in early American poetry, see Eugene L. Huddleston, “Poetical Descriptions of Pennsylvania in the Early National Period,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 93.4 (Oct. 1969), 487–509.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 129–30.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 130. The reference is to Matt. 17:4, scene of Christ’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor.

⁸³ While the hymn, included in an appendix to Edwards’s *Materials Towards a History of the American Baptists*, is anonymous, David Music and Paul Richardson suggest that Edwards himself may have been the author. See David W. Music and Paul A. Richardson, “*I Will Sing the Wondrous Story*”: *A History of Baptist Hymnody in North America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 122.

worked performatively, sanctifying the Schuylkill by linking it typologically with the Jordan.⁸⁴

Jesus master, O discover
Pleasure in us, now we stand
On this bank of Schuylkill River,
To obey thy great command.

Make this stream, like Jordan, blessed,
Leprous Namaans enter in.
Rise, said Jesus, be baptized,
And you wash away your sin.⁸⁵

The final verse invoked the spiritual sense of the newly illumined who, suddenly conscious of an enlivened creation, summoned the surrounding stones to be witnesses of the covenant brokered between Christ and his church.

Of our vows, this stone's a token,
Stone of witness, bear record
'Gainst us, if our vows be broken
Or if we foresake the Lord.⁸⁶

The stone turned out to be more than figurative allusion. The frontispiece of Morgan Edwards's history of American Baptists depicts a typical baptismal scene on the Schuylkill (see Appendix, image 1). A minister stands on the stone in question, which Edwards described as three feet high and located in the center of the ground, not far from the water. The top of the rock had been flattened and steps carved into the side, assisting its conversion into a preaching platform.

⁸⁴ Robert Keighton has argued that the "Schuylkill hymn" may have been adapted for baptisms in various other locations, including New York, where it was called "the Hudson Hymn." Robert E. Keighton, "Baptist Hymnody," *The Chronicle* 10.2 (April 1947), 83.

⁸⁵ Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the American Baptists*, 131–2.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

A second ritual function of the stone was less conventional. Edwards wrote that, around the rock, he had “often seen the people (in imitation of Christ, Lu. iii, 21) kneel to pray after baptism had been administered.”⁸⁷ To explain and defend this habit of bowing down to stones, he referred the reader to Joshua 24:

And Joshua—took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God.⁸⁸

Like Joshua Thomas amid the enchanted groves of the Chesapeake, here again the complex Israelite relationship to idolatry worked its way through evangelical forms of nature piety. Just as Joshua had appropriated a great stone set up “by the sanctuary of the Lord,” Edwards and his fellow Baptists reformed the landscape to serve a new set of religious meanings. What might appear to an observer as idol worship was in fact, he argued, the true, primitive piety of the scriptures. The newly illumined, responding to the spiritual sense, invited the creation to witness their covenant with God.

The Cultural Reformation of the Landscape

Abandoning temples built by human hands and seeking their salvation in God’s primitive cathedrals, evangelicals sought to revive the piety of the church and extend the Reformation heritage by turning back the dead hand of formalism, innovation, and superstition in favor of worship practices based directly on biblical models. Invoking stories such as Moses’ encounter with the burning bush at Mount Sinai and Jacob’s dream at Bethel, believers hallowed in memory special spaces and places in the natural

⁸⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁸⁸ Joshua 24:26–7.

landscape linked to the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit. Their efforts wrought a cultural reformation of the landscape, albeit one attended by tensions, ambivalence, and unanticipated consequences.

Beyond the physical changes to the land necessitated by practices of preaching and baptism, new-birth practices conducted in outdoor space held a number of cultural repercussions for antebellum space.⁸⁹ A common one was the proliferation of place names. Seventeenth-century Puritans had worked hard to blanket New England with the most mundane names that imagination could furnish. “When John Winthrop went exploring, he made sure that none of the features he named could be mistaken for holy places,” writes James P. Walsh. “When he came upon an odd rock formation, he sat his young son, Adam, on it and named it Adam’s Chair. Because the exploring party found they had only cheese to eat when they stopped at the base of a tor, Winthrop named it Cheese Rock.” When Winthrop discovered that Welsh Separatist John Hewes had carelessly given the “papish” name of Hewes’s Cross to a ford in Scituate, he renamed it Hewes’s Folly to memorialize the error. Other efforts to desacralize space used names to switch a site’s ritual polarity. After cutting down the maypole at Merrymount, the Puritans changed the settlement’s name to Mount Dagon, after the god of the Philistines, effectively reversing the sanctity of the site rather than simply erasing it.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ The practices of antebellum revivalism commonly required renovations to the natural landscape. Among other improvements, preparations for a camp meeting entailed felling trees to create clearings and to construct arbors and benches for attendants. Outdoor baptisms occasioned similar renovations, with many churches clearing the shoreline near their “baptisterion.” For an example of instructions on camp meeting preparation, see B. W. Gorham, *Camp Meeting Manual*; on similar efforts among Baptists, see Lindman, *Bodies of Belief*, 77.

⁹⁰ James P. Walsh, “Holy Time and Sacred Space in Puritan New England,” *American Quarterly* 32.1 (Spring 1980), 85. On Puritan attitudes to sacred space, see David D. Hall,

Evangelicals acted quite differently. Like Jacob at Bethel, believers commemorated divine action by bestowing new names on the landscape. In Connecticut alone, at least four towns—Goshen, Caanan, Bethlehem, and Sharon—were renamed after biblical sites during the Great Awakening, in recognition of the surprising work of grace in each community.⁹¹ Such naming rituals accelerated with the revivals of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most significant contribution to American cartography by antebellum revivalism is the ubiquity of place names that include the word *grove*, a legacy of the camp meeting tradition, a practice that may have begun with the celebrity and success of Wesleyan Grove on Martha’s Vineyard.⁹² Methodists in particular saw acts of renaming as a powerful outward marker of the inward “reformation in morals” that accompanied the revivals. In western Somerset County, Devil’s Island and the nearby Damned Quarter, two islands northeast of Tangier Island reputed to be “notorious dens of pirates and other undesirables,” were renamed Deal Island and Dame’s Quarter, respectively, to demonstrate the changes wrought by the camp meetings. The Rev. D. Daily pressed the point, “lest there should seem to be a recognition of Satan’s having some right to, or property in them.”⁹³ Given the reality of the demonic for evangelicals, acts of renaming could function as performative utterances that reformed the landscape, purging it of unholy associations and binding it to God.⁹⁴

Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 117–165.

⁹¹ George Steward and Matt Weiland, *Names of the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2008), 143.

⁹² J. B. Jackson, “The Sacred Grove in America,” in *The Necessity for Ruins* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 77–88.

⁹³ Wallace, *Parson of the Islands*, 44.

Practices of renaming also imitated patterns in biblical prophecy that tied the return of the messiah with God's covenantal marriage to the land of Israel. In Isaiah 62:4, God declares, "Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married." Through seemingly simple speech acts, evangelicals compressed layers of cultural and religious meaning and performance, combing the work of moral reform, communal exorcism, and millennial invocation.

Acts of renaming were related to other shifts in the cultural meanings of landscapes, signifying the formation of emotional attachments to sites linked with the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. In diaries and autobiographies, the attachment to camp meeting sites is particularly strong. One witness to Kentucky's Cane Ridge revival recalled how attendants

formed an attachment to the place where they were continually seeing so many careless sinners receiving their first impressions, and so many Deists constrained to call on the formerly despised name of Jesus; they conceived a sentiment like what Jacob felt at Bethel. "Surely the Lord is in this place," "This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."⁹⁵

If conversion awakened a new spiritual sense of nature, its ephemerality encouraged believers to return to the well for periodic refreshings. Undergoing conversion at a camp meeting offered an aid to memory: the annual return to the camp

⁹⁴ Not all names were so laden with significance. Many names functioned as pragmatic recognition of frequent use: a spot of river commonly used by Baptists might become known as "Baptist Point." See Wallace, *Parson of the Islands*, 121.

⁹⁵ William Woodward, *Surprising Accounts of the Revival of Religion: in the United States of America, in Different Parts of the World, and Among Different Denominations of Christians: With a Number of Interesting Occurrences of Divine Providence* (Philadelphia: printed and published by William W. Woodward, 1802), 108–9.

ground could become charged with significance, providing the opportunity to reconnect with the physical ground where the soul marked the passage from death to life. Joshua Thomas felt moved whenever he stepped into the camp in Tangiers Island. “I love the very ground,” said Thomas, “that dear spot, that precious place, where from above, I first received the pledge of love.”⁹⁶

In the case of conversions that took place in more remote sites, the personal linkages established in spiritual experience between biblical typology and local landscapes relied much more heavily on memory. William Glendinning’s years of trial and deliverance from Satan on his “little Mount” in a clearing outside Baltimore offers such a case. The testimony of the Virginia Baptist John Taylor reveals similar patterns of landscape and memory. While Taylor was ascending a mountain in the early 1770s, he found himself suddenly face to face with a “high, overhanging rock.” In its looming shadow, Taylor felt transported forward in time to the Great White Throne judgment, described in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Revelation, where God will sentence each soul to eternity. “To my knees I went under this great rock,” Taylor wrote, “and as I began to whisper something like this: Thy throne, O Most High, shall remain unsullied and unimpeached, when thy wrath is inflicted on me.”⁹⁷ Taylor’s story referenced another scene in John’s Revelation, which describes how, in the last days, people will call for rocks to fall on them to hide them from God’s wrath—a verse which, when Taylor heard it read aloud during an earlier outdoor meeting, had gone through him like an

⁹⁶ Wallace, *Parson of the Islands*, 91.

⁹⁷ Taylor, *History of Ten Baptist Churches*, 217.

“electric shock.”⁹⁸ Taylor’s conclusion tied the hanging rock to a third biblical site. “What I met with at the hanging rock, small as it might appear, was so great to me that I changed my resolution as to dying in the mountain, or continuing there all night,” Taylor wrote. Like the disciples who had witnessed Christ’s Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, Taylor hoped to sustain an experiential peak by remaining rooted on holy ground. Eventually he was forced to return home, “as a new man this far.” But in memory and public testimony, he returned frequently to the rock. “I shall never forget the hanging rock while I live, nor even in heaven,” he wrote.⁹⁹

For itinerants and preachers, who typically stayed put no longer than a few days in one place, the chance to return to the site of one’s conversion offered a rare opportunity to recharge one’s spiritual batteries and recommit oneself to ministerial labor. When Lorenzo Dow and his wife, Peggy, returned home to Connecticut to visit family, they spent much of the time walking in the grove where Lorenzo had been converted as a teenager. As Peggy wrote:

We spent the week I may say in a solitary way, in taking our rambles through the lonely walks that my Lorenzo had taken in early days of childhood, before his tender mind was matured; and after he had arrived at the age of fifteen, when his heart was wrought upon by the Spirit of God—and this was the sweet grove at the foot of a beautiful hill, through which ran a charming rivulet of water; where he used to go and meditate and pray to that God, who was able to save and did deliver his soul, and enabled him to take up his cross, and go forth to call sinners to repentance.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Ibid., 16–17.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 217.

¹⁰⁰ Peggy Dow, *Vicissitudes in the Wilderness; exemplified, in the Journal of Peggy Dow*, fifth ed. (Norwich, Conn.: William Faulkner, 1833), 239.

Dow's description, with its picturesque evocation of green hills and rolling streams, points up the connection between religious experience and natural aesthetics. As the nineteenth century progressed, primitivist and antiformalist appeals to nature felt the influence of a popular culture tilting influenced by Romantic sensibilities. Sentimental attachment to natural scenery became a characteristic feature of personal narratives, a mark of broader cultural currents that found fascination in the sublime and picturesque aspects of natural scenery.¹⁰¹ Evangelicals, while coming under the sway of the new cultural currents in the late eighteenth century, continued to chart a peculiar course. Rather than yielding to a more generalized sensibility of Romanticism, evangelicals tended to reinterpret antiformalist and primitivist principles through a Romantic lens.

If evangelicals adopted sentimental vocabulary to describe sublime mountains and picturesque rivers and forests, their sacramental landscapes differed from those of

¹⁰¹ On the main features of Romanticism, see M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), esp. chapter 7. For the influence of Romanticism on nineteenth-century British Evangelicalism, see David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 75–94. While the work of eighteenth-century evangelical clergymen such as Jonathan Edwards was strongly influenced by an Enlightenment aesthetics of nature emphasizing order and regularity, in my research, I have failed to detect a similar influence in the writings of lay evangelicals, which seem more directly indebted to biblical/typological and primitivist attitudes to nature. For an example of an elite nineteenth-century evangelical grappling to translate orthodox doctrine into the new key of Romantic thought, see James Marsh, "Preliminary essay to Samuel T. Coleridge," in *Aids to Reflection* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1971); see also Peter Carafiol, *Transcendent Reason: James Marsh and the Forms of Romantic Thought* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1982), especially the last chapter, "From Edwards to Emerson: The Romantic Mind and Social Forms"; Conrad Cherry, *Nature and Religious Imagination: From Edwards to Bushnell* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Peter J. Schmitt, "The Church in the Wildwood," in *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 141–145; Jerome Tharaud, "Evangelical Space: Art, Experience, and the Ethical Landscape in America, 1820–1860," doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 2011.

Romantics and Transcendentalists. While Transcendentalists experienced the spiritual delights of nature from a perch of well-heeled leisure, evangelical experiences of nature tended to the rough and tumble, tacking between ecstasy and agony.¹⁰² Though often not devoid of charm, early camp-meeting sites, especially on the frontier, were generally chosen less for their practical and ritual utility: for instance, the proximity to running water and provision of natural shade to ward off heatstroke. Contemporary accounts of camp meetings tend to dwell less on the scenery than on their ability to awaken primitive piety. Christian Newcomer noted the “handsome grove” that sheltered one camp meeting on his preaching circuit, but John Taylor described the camp where he first came under conviction as a “beloved tho’ homely spot of nature.”¹⁰³ As Taylor’s account of the “lonesome, hanging rock” suggests, sentimental attachment to natural spaces often accrued to the experiences they generated, rather than from the inherent aesthetic qualities of the landscape. Natural landscapes became sacred to evangelicals because of their ability to mediate the divine presence, encounters that merged local sites with biblical landscapes of redemption.

Primitive Piety or Pagan Idolatry? Anxiety in the Sacred Grove

Not everyone in antebellum America shared the revivalist enthusiasm for outdoor worship. Many opponents of revivalism, which included religious liberals and establishmentarians, focused their attacks on the orthodoxy of the camp meeting.

Rejecting claims that collective worship in “God’s first temples” constituted a return to

¹⁰² For more on the tension between agony and ecstasy in evangelical experiences of nature, see chapter two.

¹⁰³ Newcomer, *Life and Journal of Christian Newcomer*, 125; Taylor, *History of Ten Baptist Churches*, 17.

biblical models and the rejection of formalism for vital piety, they presented plain-air meetings as recent innovations and noisy distractions. Worse, camp meetings constituted a “machinery of superstition” that perverted ancient prototypes by directly challenging longstanding patterns of authority and tradition in ministry laid down by Protestant reformers.¹⁰⁴ The author of an anonymous pamphlet published around 1825 perceived the “spirit of innovation” in Tennessee revivalism, comparing camp meetings to the “extravagancies and absurdities of the Romish church.”¹⁰⁵ While acknowledging the biblical precedent for outdoor worship, the writer objected to the intentionality—the degree of planning and organization—behind the meetings. The Israelites worshipped in the wilderness, he suggested, because they had no other dwellings; Jesus preached to crowds in deserts and on mountains because they had spontaneously dropped their daily concerns and followed him. These newfound primitivists, on the other hand, turned disgruntlement with established authority into calculated, organized confusion.

The Methodist attraction to groves and reputation for rowdiness offered critics the clearest evidence for linking the false god of revivalism with the pernicious polytheism of the Old Testament. The chaos of the camp meeting, he wrote, resembled not the “simplicity of Christ” but the “worship of the heathen”: “the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, assembled in a *grove*,” he continues, “could hardly have presented a scene of greater confusion.”¹⁰⁶ Another anonymous critic placed the revivalists on the wrong side of reform: “The idolaters of Israel, dissatisfied with their stated mode and

¹⁰⁴ Samuel Adams Devens, *Sketches of Martha’s Vineyard and other Reminiscences of travel at home, etc.* (Boston: J. Monroe and Co., 1838), 15.

¹⁰⁵ *Camp-Meetings Described and Exposed; and “Strange Things” Stated* (U.S.: N. D., but written around 1825), 7.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* Italics in original.

place of worship generally had their idols, and worshipped them, in *groves*. But whenever some pious reformer, like Josiah, Hezekiah, or Jehosophat arose, he at once cut down the *groves* and restored things to their former order.”¹⁰⁷

Charges of idolatry extended to other popular evangelical practices of nature, notably baptism. In a satirical poem from 1838, outdoor baptism by immersion as practiced by Campbellites and other primitivists was linked both with novelty and with ancient pagan traditions of river worship.

The dead's alive the lost is found
For Peter Cartwright's on the ground
We Campbellites and New lights too
From him will surely get our due....
He will break our trashtrap with his rod
And set at naught our water god.¹⁰⁸

While outsiders accused them of superstitious innovation and pagan idolatry, some insiders began to harbor their own doubts. The proximity between evangelical practices in the “forest temple” and biblical accounts of polytheistic worship made it often difficult to be sure whether one was faithfully memorializing the activity of the Holy Spirit or engaging in the unauthorized veneration of nature. In a letter to a friend, Hannah Syng Bunting, a Philadelphia Methodist and early Sunday school teacher, sounded a note of uncertainty during a return visit to a camp meeting in Pennington, New Jersey, where she had experienced a work of saving grace. Her feelings shifted uncomfortably between nostalgic reverence and ambivalence for what she called her “consecrated grove.” On the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 5. Italics in original.

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous poem from August, 1838, Union Campground, Salt Creek, Logan County, Illinois; Cartwright vertical file, Illinois State Historical Society, Springfield; also printed in John Hallwas, ed., *Illinois Literature: the Nineteenth Century* (Macomb: Illinois Heritage Press, 1986), 120. Quoted in Robert Bray, *Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 161.

one hand, the pilgrimage to Pennington had refreshed the living memory of God's work in her heart. "Here," she wrote, "I can gaze on the spot where the load of guilt was removed from my oppressed bosom." Yet, in coming, she continued, "I have felt some hesitancy. Forbid, O my God, that I should abuse this means of grace."¹⁰⁹

Bunting's ambivalence extended to other sites of sacred memory. "What is this sublunary world? A vapour!...too low they build who build below the stars," she wrote during a visit to a camp meeting in Frankford, Delaware, quoting British poet Edward Young. Her tone shifted as she noted some "tender recollections" awakened by her tenure in what she called the "sacred wood." Looking at her tent, she realized that it was pitched in nearly the same spot where a friend had been saved on a previous visit. In a passage evoking Miriam and other Old Testament prototypes of outdoor worship, Bunting waxed sentimental as she remembered uniting with two close friends "to worship the Holy One of Israel."¹¹⁰ Though both were now deceased, she sensed a lingering spiritual presence. "In the grove," she wrote, "I oftentimes felt as though their sainted spirits hovered near."¹¹¹ The membrane between heaven and earth had worn thin.

¹⁰⁹ Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Hannah Syng Bunting*, 129.

¹¹⁰ The "Song of Miriam," found in Exodus 15, was frequently depicted in lithographs published in antebellum annuals and gift books. A typical case is Thomas Prichard Rossiter's "Miriam," which appeared as the frontispiece to *Women of the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1848) and accompanied the poem "Miriam" by Clara Lucas Balfour in the same volume (see Appendix, image 2).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 110. This sense of the close proximity of heaven and earth and of departed spirits features frequently in antebellum revival narratives. Joshua Thomas's account of the spirit chorus in the treetops on Tangiers Island offers one instance. In the memorialized founding of the Ocean Grove camp meeting, E. H. Stokes rose in a prayer meeting and spoke of "the nearness of the spirit-world," separated from the attendants by a "thin veil."

As if sensing the danger of conflating present life and the world to come, Bunting pulled back. “We have much of the presence of God here,” she wrote, “but this is not heaven.” The only certainties of earthly life remain “temptation, disappointment, and pain.”¹¹² However porous the barrier between heaven and earth, in the spirited grove the fullness of things could only be glimpsed and tasted, a sense of sweetness that faded and renewed a holy hunger for consummation.

John Taylor felt similarly conflicted when he returned to the sacred spaces in his spiritual autobiography. During a visit to the camp meeting where he had fallen under conviction, Taylor found a “great stump sacred to me,” from which the preacher had worked on his soul. He felt compelled to break off a piece of the stump and take it home, as one might wish “to look at until you die.” But Taylor resisted, admitting that he feared others might read his meditations in the wrong spirit. “It may look a piece of superstitious rant,” he admitted, “but perhaps these contemplations, are worthy of Heaven itself.”¹¹³

If evangelicals feared the superstitious veneration of nature, these fears became more complicated when vital religion mixed with nascent nationalism. Like many nineteenth-century Americans, Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College, found himself swept away with feeling in the presence of Plymouth Rock, on which the first Puritans were said to have lighted from *The Mayflower* upon their arrival in America in 1620.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ibid., 111.

¹¹³ Taylor, *History of Ten Baptist Churches*, 16–17.

¹¹⁴ In fact, the first references to Plymouth Rock in any written source appear one hundred years after the 1620 landing. In his nineteenth-century history of Plymouth, James Thatcher claimed the tradition of the rock was preserved and transmitted orally through the family of Thomas Faunce, he claimed his father had shown him the precise post of the landing. Thatcher further claims that in 1741, amid plans to erect a wharf to over the rock, Faunce, then 95 years of age, was relayed in a chair to the shore, “where a

Dwight's feelings of reverence were complicated by his commitment to Reformed doctrine. As an evangelical, he knew not to bow down to wood and stone. God's glory shone universally from every corner of the creation. Yet, as a New Englander, Dwight confessed that he found it nearly impossible to stand in the presence of the rock

without experiencing emotions very different from those which are excited by any common object of the same nature.... Let him reason as much, as coldly, and as ingeniously as he pleases, he will still regard that spot with emotions wholly different from those which are excited by other places of equal or even superior importance.¹¹⁵

One did not have to go to the Bible or to the ends of the earth to find examples of the idolatrous worship of nature. Among residents of Plymouth it was common knowledge that two "Sacrifice rocks" sacred to Native Americans could be found a short ride out of town on the road to Sandwich. In his 1832 history of Plymouth, James Thatcher described how these rocks were covered with sticks and stones, it being "the constant practice among the aboriginals, to throw a stone, or stick on the rock in passing." Thatcher noted that Gideon Hawley, the eighteenth-century missionary to the Mashpee, had "endeavored to learn from them the design of this singular rite, but could

number of the inhabitants were assembled to witness the patriarch's benediction." Pointing to the rock, Faunce "bedewed it with his tears and bid to it an everlasting adieu." Thatcher shared Dwight's reverence for the rock: "Standing on this rock, therefore, we may fancy a magic power ushering us into the presence of our fathers. The hallowed associations which cluster around that precious memorial, inspires sentiments of love of country, and a sacred reverence for its primitive institutions. In contemplation, we may hold communion with celestial spirits, and receive monitions from those who are at rest in their graves.... Where is the New Englander who would be willing to have that rock buried out of sight and forgotten?" James Thatcher, *History of the Town of Plymouth, from Its First Settlement in 1620, to the Year 1832* (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1832), 29–30. On the place of Plymouth Rock in American national identity, see John Seelye, *Memory's Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

¹¹⁵ Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, Vol. 3 (New Haven: Published by Timothy Dwight, 1822), 110–111.

only conjecture that it was an acknowledgment of an invisible Being, the unknown God whom this people worshipped. This pile was their altar.”¹¹⁶

Dwight makes no mention of the sacrifice rocks in his multi-volume narrative of his travels in New England. But given his close friendship with Hawley and his extensive knowledge of New England, it is plausible that he had heard of or even visited them. In any event, his emotional attachment to Plymouth Rock won out over any anxiety related to localizing the sacred. Like John Taylor, who hoped his superstitious attachment to the “great stump” could be turned to heavenly purposes, Dwight retained a place for the spiritual utility of “innocent” attachments:

For myself, I cannot wish this trait in the human character obliterated. In a higher state of being, where truth is universally as well as cordially embraced, and virtue controls without a rival, this prejudice, if it must be called by that name, will become useless, and may, therefore, safely be discarded. But in our present condition every attachment, which is innocent, has its use, and contributes both to fix and to soften man.¹¹⁷

In the end, Dwight’s commitment to the place of emotion in moral and spiritual development bested any abstract commitment to iconoclasm. In a strange way, it could be argued that his tolerance was built on Reformed anthropology. Humans being prone to idolatry by their fallen nature, Dwight felt it more sensible to forgive innocent attachments than, in striving for perfection, to stumble into greater sins. Evangelical pragmatism overcame his idealism.

The aesthetic appeal of nature’s forms generated another persistent fear. At times, evangelical experiences of the beauty of nature could generate sympathy for those who

¹¹⁶ Thatcher, *History of the Town of Plymouth*, 351.

¹¹⁷ Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, vol. 3, 111.

turned the objects of creation into gods. Standing in the presence of a “shattered,” ancient oak, the English poet and early evangelical William Cowper had confessed,

Could a mind imbued
With truth from Heaven created thing adore,
I might with reverence kneel and worship thee.
It seems idolatry with some excuse
When our forefather druids in their oaks
Imagined sanctity.¹¹⁸

Thomas Coke saw a similar form of excusable idolatry in a particularly memorable scene viewed from his ship in the Atlantic: “I never in my life saw so beautiful a sky as this morning a little before sun-rise,” wrote Coke in his journal. “So delightful a mixture of colors, and so fine a fret-work. I do not wonder that the poor Heathens worship the sun.”¹¹⁹ But nature’s beauty could easily become a stumbling block for those in need of the gospel. Harriet Beecher Stowe recalled one “dewy, fresh” summer morning in 1825, when she walked alone to church at the age of fourteen while on a family vacation in Litchfield, Connecticut. Her walk led through a New England landscape similar to the one that had inspired the meditations of Jonathan Edwards a century earlier.¹²⁰ But rather than inspiring thoughts of divine glory, she found her attempts at sober self-examination undone by all the pretty things. “I tried hard to feel my sins and count them

¹¹⁸ William Cowper, *The Poems of William Cowper*, Vol. 1 (Chiswick: C. Whittingham, 1822), 197.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Coke, *Extracts of the Journals of the Late Rev. Thomas Coke, L.L.D.* (Dublin: R. Napper for the Methodist Book-Room, 1816), 42.

¹²⁰ On Edwards and the aesthetics of the Connecticut River Valley, see Clyde Holbrook, *Jonathan Edwards, the Valley, and Nature* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1987); see also Cherry, *Nature and Religious Imagination*, especially chapters 1 and 2; Avihu Zakai, “Jonathan Edwards and the Language of Nature: The Re-enchantment of the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning,” *Journal of Religious History* 26.1 (February 2002): 15–41.

up,” she wrote. “But what with the birds, the daisies, and the brooks that rippled by the way, it was impossible.”¹²¹

To the unregenerate, nature’s beauty could cut two ways. In some cases, experiences of beauty and order in the creation could function as a form of pre-evangelism, leading the soul to reflect on the existence of a creator.¹²² Just as real, however, was the possibility that feelings of pleasure and the sense of fullness wrought by experiences of natural beauty could distract the soul from its desperate condition. In 1844, R. Parker, a female writer about whom we know little else, published a collection of meditations on religious and moral subjects. In “Reasons for Treating Only Upon What is Sacred,” she denounced writers who wasted their imaginative abilities to “sketch the landscape of earth” and “unfold to us the magic power that gives harmony to the visible creation,” rather than alerting their readers to the moral peril of dying in their sins. Her attack included ministers who preached lovely sermons “depicting the fascinations of earth” and, in so doing, “idolize earth and forget our home in the skies.”¹²³ This wasteful preoccupation with natural scenery extended to romanticized descriptions of the apocalypse described in the Book of Revelation, the “falling cliffs of the mighty rocks—the devastation of the forests—the fearful ravages of the destroying element that consigns to chaotic oblivion the magnificent works of art, power, nature, and invention.”¹²⁴

¹²¹ Annie Fields, ed. *The Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1897), 50.

¹²² On evangelical practices of the contemplation of God through contemplation of nature, see chapter two.

¹²³ R. Parker. *The Tree of Life: containing moral & religious subjects, calculated to benefit & interest*. Lowell, Mass.: 1844, 16.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

In her criticism of aesthetic appeals to nature, Parker was calling out reigning Romantic conceptions of the sublime. Popularized in traditions of landscape painting represented by English artists such as John Martin and Americans such as Thomas Cole and other members of the Hudson Valley School, sublime landscape were intended to evoke feelings of terror or awe, feelings that though fearful also generated pleasure in the viewer.¹²⁵ For Parker, the deliberate attempt to evoke sublime feelings without any corresponding “fear of the future” was a form of assisted spiritual suicide. By making such instructive scenes of judgment and destruction attractive and safe for the viewer or listener, they would “allure the unwary to forgetfulness and slumber upon the brink of danger.”¹²⁶

The ever-present potential to abuse the beauty of the natural world was an ancient thorn in the side of Christian practice, an anxiety deepened by Platonism, which viewed matter as a corruption of spirit lacking any independent reality of its own. Antony the Great chained his head to his chest to avoid being distracted from his struggle with demons by the beauties of the landscape. Augustine lamented his misspent youth in which he abused the beautiful things that God had made by loving them more than the being who made them and in whose image their beauty was modeled.¹²⁷ Closer to Stowe’s own

¹²⁵ On John Martin, see Barbara C. Morden, *Apocalypse Now!* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria Press, 2010); on Thomas Cole and the Hudson Valley School, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology and American Landscape Painting, 1825–1875* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹²⁶ Parker, *Tree of Life*, 18. For more on the contemplation of death and the Last Days, see chapter 4.

¹²⁷ In Book 10 of *Confessions*, Augustine suggested how easy it was to confuse the reflected beauty of created things with the original beauty of their divine model: “Late have I loved you, O Beauty, so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! And behold, you were within me and I was outside, and there I sought for you, and in my deformity I rushed

day, Isaac Watts, the great hymn-writer, had summarized evangelical ambivalence to natural beauty:

Each pleasure Hath its Poison too
& Every Sweet a Snare
the Brightest things Below ye Sky
Give But a flattering Light
We should Respect Some Danger Nigh¹²⁸

Such warnings did not mean that saints needed to avoid all pleasure or beauty.

Enjoyment of God's creation was generally considered a safe substitute for "worldly" distractions generated by human society. Still, it required constant vigilance to ensure that one was making proper use of God-given delights.

Stowe finally made it to church. The sermon, delivered by her father, affected a work of saving grace. On the walk home, her soul "illumined with joy," the world took on an entirely new aspect. "It seemed to me as if Nature herself were hushing her breath to hear the music of heaven," she wrote.¹²⁹ Her language echoed the Idealism of the contemporary English poet and evangelical Robert Pollok, a favorite of Hannah Syng Bunting's, who described another instance of grace in which "Nature seem'd / in silent contemplation to adore / Its Maker."¹³⁰ In the moment of conversion, anxiety turned to delight, idolatry to adoration, as the new eyes of faith recognized and venerated emblems

headlong into the well-formed things that you have made. You were with me, and I was not with you. Those outer beauties held me far from you, yet if they had not been in you, they would not have existed at all." Augustine, *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 144.

¹²⁸ Isaac Watts, James Manning Winchell, *An Arrangement of the Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of Isaac Watts* (Boston: Richardson & Lord, Cummings & Hilliard, Cornhill, 1820), 17. For more on Watts's influence on American evangelical culture and the contemplation of nature, see chapter two.

¹²⁹ Fields, *The Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 50.

¹³⁰ Robert Pollok, "The Course of Time." In Charles Dexter Cleveland, ed., *English Literature of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: E. C. & J. Biddle, 1857), 193.

of the creator embedded in the creation.

Stowe's experience pointed to the solution for the problem posed by evangelical practices of nature: a Christocentric piety informed by the spiritual senses. Ultimately, Hannah Syng Bunting could "gaze on the spot where the load of guilt was removed" because she gazed on it with new eyes. In the same way that the unregenerate were doomed to pervert the creation and the primitive worship of the Israelites, the "new man" was free to worship the divine in and alongside the creation. Because the new sense of the heart saw Christ in all things, all things were freed up for their original use. After voicing her fears, Bunting confided to her journal, "My expectations and desires are centred in God, so that I can say, 'Nor earth, nor all its empty toys, Can tempt my meanest love.' Jesus is the sole object of my admiration." John Taylor worried that readers might mistake his reflections for "a piece of superstitious rant," but in the end he held to the hope that his sentimental attachment to his sacred stump and hanging rock would be "worthy of Heaven itself." In a similar way, Timothy Dwight, moved to tears in the presence of Plymouth Rock, allowed heart to win over head and affirmed the utility of such "innocent" idols, in the hope that the feelings generated might help "to fix and to soften" fallen human nature. But worries managed could not be exorcised. The closer heaven came to earth, the closer also the proximity between infidelity and idolatry. The effort to stake out a middle ground between the two was rarely settled or uncontested.

Conclusion

From the woodland revivals that broke out in 1730 among persecuted Protestants in Salzburg to the great camp meetings of antebellum Kentucky, evangelical belief and practice were forged in close association with the world of nature. Depending on the

mood and the moment, they shifted from Jacob to Hezekiah and back again, tearing down superstitious markers and memorials only to turn and consecrate other sites to sacred memory. Evangelicals navigated the potentially idolatrous implications of this localization of the sacred by appealing to a Christ-centered piety and the doctrine of the spiritual senses. In private retreat and public revival, converts described waking in a “new world,” a dynamic creation imprinted with divine signatures and praising Christ, the man-god who married heaven and earth, matter and spirit. Vital piety linked millennial expectation, the spread of revivalism, and an enchanted view of nature. Paraphrasing Isaiah’s prophecy, they sang verses such as, “Break forth into singing, ye trees of the wood, For Jesus is bringing lost sinners to God.”¹³¹

The postbellum age brought gains and losses for revivalism. On the one hand, by the mid-1870s, Steven Cooley writes, “no significant concentration of Northern Methodists from Maine to Iowa was more than a day’s train ride from a Victorian camp meeting.”¹³² At the same time, the fires of primitivism had long begun to flag as the energies of reformers and revivalists shifted toward the cities teeming with new immigrants and old vices. The wave of nostalgia for “old-time religion,” represented by a crop of camp-meeting histories that celebrated the “days of power in the forest temple,” confirmed the decline of a once-vital institution.¹³³

¹³¹ *Revival and Camp Meeting Minstrel* (Philadelphia: Perkinpine & Higgins, 1867), 224. The hymn paraphrases Isaiah 44:23 and 55:12; see also Psalm 96:12 and I Chronicles 16:33 for variations on the theme.

¹³² Cooley, “Manna and the Manual,” 133.

¹³³ Notable works from the camp-meeting genre in the second half of the nineteenth century include A. P. Mead, *Manna in the Wilderness; or the Grove and its Altar* (Philadelphia: Perkinpine and Higgins, 1860); McLean and Eaton, *Penuel*; B. Pomeroy, *Visions from Modern Mounts* (Albany, N.Y.: Van Benthuyzen, 1871); Ellen T. H. Harvey, *Wilderness and*

Early evangelical notions of sacred space had always been tied to the temporary, fleeting nature of outdoor gatherings and the unpredictable spirit that moved among them. The nineteenth-century Methodist Bishop Gilbert Haven defined the camp meeting as “a temporary occupancy of the summer woods where the hills and trees are specially sanctified so that the church might retire to meet with her Lord and Lover and return to the world transformed.”¹³⁴ The gradual movement toward more permanent encampments, already well underway when Haven wrote those lines in 1873, marked a gradual shift from primitive piety to formalized tradition, a shift hastened by the upward social mobility of postbellum evangelicalism. By the 1870s, Steven Cooley has noted, camp meetings at sites such as Wesleyan Grove on Martha’s Vineyard and Round Lake in upstate New York had lost some of their fleeting, temporary nature with the rise of “permanently established campsites, which complemented the development of more traditional churches.”¹³⁵

Laid out in 1867 by a group of planners that included an architect and a landscape gardener, Wesleyan Grove grew slowly from a huddle of plain white tents to a 34-acre “fairy-land” that, in the words of Ellen Weiss, fused “camp meeting, resort, and residential enclave.” Weiss has argued that the Grove represented a work of architectural nostalgia, an attempt to replicate “the compelling magic, the otherworldliness” of the Methodist camp meeting in a Romantic key. Offering Methodists and visitors a retreat from the struggles of city life, the planners laid out a sacred suburb in the woods, a

Mount; A Poem of Tabernacles (Boston: John Bent, 1872); George Hughes, *Days of Power in the Forest Temple* (Boston: John Best, 1873); and Adam Wallace, *A Modern Pentecost* (Philadelphia: Methodist Home Journal, 1873).

¹³⁴ Hughes, *Days of Power in the Forest Temple*, 4.

¹³⁵ Cooley, “Manna and the Manual,” 132.

rambling grid for hundreds of tiny gingerbread cottages set one next to another, organized around the original consecrated preaching area.¹³⁶ Weiss has taken note of an anonymous reporter in the *Camp Meeting Herald* of 1866 who wrote that he “wished he had the pencil of Turner or the pen of Byron or Ruskin to describe the mixture of man, nature, and joy of the Grove.”¹³⁷ With the clearing of trees and the erection of permanent structures, evangelicals made their gatherings less dependent on the vagaries of weather and climate. Insulating themselves from acts of nature, they also unwittingly reduced the frequency of nature’s providential signs and communications, which had in the past contributed to the success of a revival. Blessings and omens, like the falling branch that had alerted Francis Asbury’s listeners to the presence of the devil, became increasingly rare.

Even so, the camp meeting tradition continued to create new sacred localities in the postbellum era. The founding of the Methodist camp meeting in 1869 at Ocean Grove, New Jersey, a site often referred to as “God’s Square Mile,” illustrates how the reformation of the landscape could be accomplished through a performative utterance.¹³⁸ An hour into the first prayer meeting on July 31, 1869, Ellwood Stokes rose and spoke the first four words of the Bible, “In the beginning, God,” then stopped and added, “Lo, God

¹³⁶ Ellen Weiss, *City in the Woods: The Life and Design of an American Camp Meeting on Martha’s Vineyard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), xvii.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹³⁸ Ocean Grove is not the only, or the first, evangelical community to declare a specific geographical space God’s own. It was common for Moravians to call their burial grounds, “God’s Acre.” Jon Sensbach notes how the graveyards symbolically recreated the hill of Golgotha, site of Christ’s crucifixion, by being located on a hill to the west of the village, where the intersection of cedar-lined streets made the form of a cross. See Jon F. Sensbach, *Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763–1840* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 178. The practice also appears in Holiness and Pentecostal communities.

is here.”¹³⁹ Stokes’s ritualized speech moved beyond simple reformist impulses, marking a ritual reenactment of the creation of the world that set the camp apart from ordinary space as a type of Eden, the paradise garden.¹⁴⁰

The new birth marked not the end of evangelical engagement with the natural world, but the beginning. Conversion opened onto the next stage of spiritual development, the “new life,” identified by Methodists and others with the pursuit of holiness or sanctification. One powerful path to purification in antebellum America entailed practices of contemplation and meditation on the “book of nature.” Through careful subtraction of the self, the spiritually advanced sought closer union with Christ through union with the creation, which modeled for humanity the advanced spiritual state of unceasing prayer.

¹³⁹ Stokes was citing the Gerhard Tersteegen hymn, “Lo, God Is Here,” translated from the German by John Wesley and first included in Wesley’s *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739). For more on the hymn as a vitalist anthem of divine immanence, see chapter two.

¹⁴⁰ Morris S. Daniels, *The Story of Ocean Grove* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1919), 281.

Part II: The New Life

Chapter 2

“Evangelical Mysticism”: Spiritual Progress, Divine Union, and Contemplation of the Book of Nature

On a snowy night in December 1791, Sarah Jones walked into the woods of Mecklenburg County, Virginia, in search of what she called “the depth of entering into God, by meditation.” Jones, a convert to Methodism at a local revival, had embraced her new religious life with gusto. The thirty-seven-old mother and wife of a local plantation owner had a special prayer house built on the edge of the property, where she could retreat from the responsibilities of the household in pursuit of divine union.¹

On this night, however, rather than go to her prayer house—which she called her “Bethel,” a “little temple built for God”—Jones chose a nearby grove in the rolling Virginia countryside for her spiritual exercises. Perhaps her decision had to do with the recent snowfall, unusual for the South. For two hours, Jones knelt in the snow and prayed. In a letter written later that night, she described her experience:

In the evening, though piercingly cold, I rushed to a distant piney grove, facing the beauty of the nearly full moon, and immediately experienced the unquestionable advantage of distant retirement for prayer. O may not one in health oppose it, as Jesus Christ left the example. To me, my every days experience speaks it profitable, more loudly than seven thunders. The thing itself proves earnestness. The awful look, and profound silence, &c. melted my heart: —I couched beneath a neighbouring pine, whose courteous limbs defended the pilgrim; the gentle queen of night cast a beauty on the snowy earth; while mingling shades increased silence and solemnity—all helped my eager spirit into God: and there I plunged from agony deep, into deep mystery; and God only must know in time, how deep I traded for true pleasures.... About 9, my soul was as fire, until 11, when I experienced greater things than I shall ever make plain in this

¹ Sarah Jones, *Devout Letters: Or, Letters Spiritual and Friendly*, ed. Jeremiah Minter (Alexandria: Jeremiah Minter, 1804), 101.

world.²

Jones's narrative is striking in a number of respects. First is the way in which she sought out a natural setting for her devotions over her purpose-built cabin. Jones went to the woods because she wanted to, not because she lacked a suitable prayer closet. Second is the way in which her experience of the natural environment—the beauty of the pine forest, the falling snow, the moonlight—worked to deepen her devotions and speed her passage into “divine mysteries” that resisted reason and language. Pleasure taken in nature's beauty, however, was held in tension with pain, the “agony deep” of her snowy trial slowly yielding to “deep mystery.”³ Rather than inhibit her devotions, Jones's ordeal seems to have increased her desire for God. To those who might have considered such ascetic exertions unworthy of a Protestant or the wife of a plantation owner, she defended her practice of “distant retirement” by appealing to Christ's model in the gospels and to the evidence of own experience: “O may not one in health oppose it, as Jesus Christ left the example. To me, my every days experience speaks it profitable, more loudly than seven thunders.”⁴ Finally, Jones's journey followed a pattern of spiritual progress, what she called “the depth of entering into God,” a morphology of divine ascent that moved

² Jones, *Devout Letters*, 106. For more on Jones's background, see Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, “A Tale of Two Patriarchs; or, How a Eunich and a Wife Created a Family in the Church,” *Journal of Family History* 28.4 (Oct. 2003), 490–509.

³ In addition to Thomas Coke, who will be considered at length later in the chapter, Elias Smith, the herbal physician, journalist, and Baptist preacher (he later joined the Christian movement) offers an other example of evangelical mysticism and its relation to experiences of pain and pleasure at the hands of nature. Michael Kenny writes that Smith received a “vision of the Lamb of God on Mount Zion while his body was stuck in a snowdrift in the forest under a bindle of firewood.” Michael G. Kenny, *The Perfect Law of Liberty: Elias Smith and the Providential History of America* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 196.

⁴ Jones, *Devout Letters*, 106.

through nature to supernature. As she ascended from contemplation of visible realities to hidden spiritual truths, her devotional language shifted from prayer to praise, from fear or distant awe to love, from absence to presence, and from knowledge of self to knowledge of God. In seeking the divine face in and through a natural landscape that prepared, punished, and tried the limits of her physical endurance, Jones found a lever of transcendence.

This chapter explores the methods and motivations of antebellum evangelicals who employed contemplation of the natural world in their efforts to advance in the spiritual life after conversion. For evangelicals, the new birth was followed by the new life, a “wilderness” stage characterized by a steady, elliptical pursuit of increasing shares of holiness or sanctification. Nourished by late medieval and early modern forms of piety, the call to holiness promised an ever-deepening participation in the life of Christ. While full consummation of that desire remained a hope for the life to come, a degree of union was attainable for the spiritually advanced, a state aided by the contemplation of nature, a practice that Puritans called “spiritualizing the creatures.”

In contrast to the public language of natural theology, the contemplation of nature drew on senses spiritual rather than common. Rather than abstract, evidential proofs, it spoke an insider language of experiential knowledge for the spiritually advanced. By sensing traces of the creator left behind in the creation, the believer ascended a ladder of contemplation, moving “through nature up to nature’s God.” An eclectic and unsystematic set of devotional practices, the contemplation of nature adapted a number of themes from Pietism, Puritanism, and late medieval and early modern Catholic mysticism, including a methodical subtraction of the will (a variant of the ancient Christian pursuit of “annihilation,” which sought to allow God to be “all in all”),

identification with Christ through *imitatio passionis*, and a cyclical movement between absence and union patterned in the erotic bridal language of the Song of Songs. The contemplation of nature was no idle recreation. For many it became a spiritual duty, a pattern of continual prayer learned through miming the habits of the faithful creation: *imitatio naturae*.

While early evangelicals broadly endorsed retreat into nature as a choice means of cultivating the presence of God, there were differences in how men and women engaged in reading and contemplating the “book of creatures.” While both men and women contemplated nature as an advanced spiritual practice, female practitioners faced special opportunities as well as anxieties. For instance, they were more likely to face accusations of pantheism, which suggested a loss of ontological identity between God and the self or creation as a whole, and quietism, an attitude of radical passivity that shirked Christ’s injunction to actively spread the Kingdom of God through evangelism and service.

To go into nature was to separate from the world and enter a primitive church, one that complemented rather than replaced corporate worship. Indeed, retirement into nature for private worship, prayer, and contemplation offered an alternative experience of corporate worship—an experience of being surrounded or engulfed by a creation engaged in the practice of unceasing prayer. Read through the newly regenerate senses, nature offered instruction and correction as well as lessons in how to pray without ceasing. As evangelicals moved through natural spaces, they habitually read the landscape as a map of the sanctification experience itself: as claustrophobic swamps yielded to lofty mountains, so evangelicals moved through sensations of divine presence and absence, depression and joy. Union with the natural world often accompanied experiences of religious ecstasy, rapture, or divine union. Sometimes these experiences accompanied

practices of voluntary suffering or *imitatio Christi*, in which the believer endured pain at the hands of nature, pain that turned to pleasure through a sense of intimate proximity to Christ.⁵ Gazing out on the antebellum landscape with the new eyes of faith, the convert was struck by the sight of a creation engaged in unstinting worship. By following its example and taking a place in this spontaneous liturgy, the pilgrim progressed.

Sanctification and the Private Language of Natural Theology

Despite the restless energy spent on evangelism, antebellum evangelicals did not view conversion as the end of the religious road but the beginning of a lifelong journey into fuller participation in the divine life. Justification, the knowledge of sins forgiven, unlocked human potentialities lost since the fall of Adam. Once benighted, the soul gazed out on new vistas in holy living. This was what evangelicals called the “new life,” a stage in which the believer experienced a new and ever-deepening desire for Christ. The pursuit of scriptural holiness implied a degree of participation in the divine life that can surprise contemporary readers. Especially for Methodists, holiness or sanctification culminated in the restoration of the divine image in the human soul and the enjoyment of total union with Christ. Henry Scougal, the seventeenth-century Scottish Episcopalian beloved by early evangelicals, described “true religion” as a “union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul...*it is*

⁵ For the purposes of this work, by experience I mean the literary and rhetorical depictions of experience. There is an intimate relationship between experience and text, which is particularly clear in the way in which the experience of nature is bound up with the singing and recitation of hymns. Evangelicals’ experience of nature was not an experience of “pure nature”—there is no such thing—but encounters mediated through the literary and theological creations of predecessors, including scripture, hymns, which evangelicals themselves wrote about and became, in turn, further models for others.

*Christ formed within us.*⁶

The term mysticism and the attendant notion of divine union is not a word typically associated with evangelicals in general and American evangelicals in particular.⁷ Studies of evangelical views on the spiritual utility of the natural world have often been limited to the rising and sinking fortunes of natural theology. There is no doubt that American evangelicals were avid producers and consumers of sermons and formal works

⁶ Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Boston: Nichols and Noyes, 1868); Originally published in London in 1677, Scougal's classic work of Protestant spirituality was reissued in America throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁷ For some of the reasons for this, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71:2 (June 2003), 273–302. Schmidt attempts to fill in a "gaping eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hole" in scholarly knowledge of the development of the modern category of mysticism in Anglo-American discourse, with particular attention to liberal religious culture. The present study, on the other hand, attends to the place of mysticism within antebellum evangelical culture. I approach mysticism not as an essentialist category but as a culturally and historically constructed set of practices that may persist even in cases where the term itself has come under attack or fallen out of use. See Amy Hollywood, "Introduction," in Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 31–2.

The general aversion to using terms such as mysticism and mystical in American religious history has a few exceptions in recent scholarship. In *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770–1810* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), Lynn Lyerly described mysticism as one element of an evangelical "style" in the antebellum south (in addition to emotionalism, asceticism, enthusiasm, and evangelism), without seriously exploring the term's history or significance. Her definition arguably overemphasized experiences such as visions and dreams compared to notions of divine ascent and union. W. R. Ward has perhaps been the most helpful in staking out a place for mysticism in the early evangelical "thought-world." In *Early Evangelicalism*, Ward argued that evangelical spirituality was characterized by a hexagon of features that included mysticism and a vitalist understanding of nature. He also suggests that confusion over the term has had a negative effect on scholarship of evangelicalism, including Jonathan Edwards, citing the decision of one Edwards's biographer to attempt to separate Edwards's aesthetics from his mysticism. See W. R. Ward, *Early Evangelicalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Among scholars of the history of Christianity, Bernard McGinn has provided one of the standard definitions, describing Christian mysticism as "a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it." See Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism 1200–1350* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 26.

of theology, which sought to reconcile the testimonies of God’s “two books,” scripture and nature, by furnishing proof of God’s existence and character from an examination of the natural world. Yet, this arrow of argument flew far from the heart of what concerned evangelicals most deeply: religious renewal. Few believed that even most convincing appeal to the argument from design could effect conversion of the heart. Natural theology, in this limited sense, could at best raise questions or prepare the ground for evangelism, which relied on the revealed truths of scripture.

Moreover, close attention to the hymns, journals, letters, and material culture of early evangelicals reveals a devotional tradition whose ambitions were framed not simply by defensiveness to developments in scientific culture but also by ancient debates and practices within the history of Christianity concerning the role of contemplation within the progressive spiritual life. A more helpful way of viewing natural theology as practiced by evangelicals is as a set of loosely related traditions, engaging a variety of audiences and expressing a variety of functions in a range of genres and practices, including but extending well beyond that of formal theological argument. Put most simply, the discourses and practices of Protestant natural theology blended two languages: a public language of evidentiary proofs and a private language of experimental piety.⁸ In the latter

⁸ My discussion of two languages or keys of evangelical natural theology builds on John Hedley Brooke’s discussion of the “pervasive tradition” of natural theology in early modern Britain. Within religious communities, Hedley argues, appeals to natural theology or design provided a range of functions beyond that of “proofs” establishing the existence or characteristics of God. Included in these functions were what Brooke called “evocation,” the poetic appeal to design to evoke the sense of awe and wonder; “confirmation,” the attempt to confirm for the understanding of believers who may harbor doubts what was already a matter of faith; “prelude” to evangelism, preparing the ground by raising essential questions to which only the gospel could provide answers; and “mediating agent” between divergent theological positions, thereby helping to avoid religious and political discord among scientists. See John H. Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991), 192–226.

case, natural theology functioned as an extension of mystical theology. For those already assured of their salvation, sensing the life of God in the natural world engaged a sensibility not available to the unregenerate, commonly expressed in terms of a spiritual sense awakened during the moment of conversion.

John Fletcher, designated successor to John Wesley, articulated his support for the contemplation of nature, a practice he described as “evangelical mysticism.” Locating the key in Paul’s letter to the Romans, Fletcher wrote, “‘the invisible things of God are clearly seen by the things which he has made,’ that is by the visible creation. And he gives the reason...when he declares, ‘that the things on earth are copies of those in heaven’.... This is the foundation of that mysticism which runs through the Gospel.”⁹ Fletcher further quoted the Cambridge Platonist Henry Moore, suggesting that it was an “indispensible duty” for believers to read the visible universe as a stamp or code for the invisible, since “the whole universe forms one great emblem, or symbolic sign of the most interesting truths.”¹⁰ Not all forms of mysticism were acceptable. There was, Fletcher averred, a “morbid mysticism” that dwelt on the abstruse and conjectural or that trumped the authority of scripture by appealing to an inner light of revelation. But “rational” mysticism, he wrote, clothed the “naked truth” in the veil of symbol “to improve her

For early evangelical attitudes to science, see John H. Brooke, “The History of Science and Religion: Some Evangelical Dimensions,” in David Livingstone, D. G. Hart, Mark Noll, eds., *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17–42.

⁹ John Fletcher, “On Evangelical Mysticism,” *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 4 vols. (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1836), 4: 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

beauty, to quicken the attention of sincere seekers, to augment the pleasure of discovery, and to conceal her charms from the prying eyes of her enemies.”¹¹

Precedents for an Evangelical Mysticism of Nature

Christian practices of meditation and contemplation on the *liber naturalis* go back at least to Origen. Scripture provided important models, suggesting sites and topics worthy of reflection. The Psalms furnished endless examples, such as “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.”¹² The Protestant reformers inherited this set of contemplative practices and theories.¹³ Barbara Lewalski

¹¹ Ibid., 7. John Fletcher was not alone among early evangelicals in tying a mystical reading of nature with advanced stages in the spiritual life. In *A Short Defense of the Mystical Writers* (appended to a longer work on the millennium), Thomas Hartley, an eighteenth-century Anglican minister with sympathies for the evangelical revival, made the case for a robust mystical sense of nature premised on the report of the spiritual senses. By mystical, Hartley intended the “consideration and exercises of that part of divinity which relates to the inward and spiritual life, and which is therefore called Spiritual or Mystical Theology; for Mystical means nothing more or less than spiritual” (377). “In a word, whatever is most excellent in religion, is so far mystical, and every interior Christian is a true Mystick, though he knows not what the name meaneth” (379). This was a spiritual elitism, but one identified not with education or ecclesiastically connection but with the new life that flowed from the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit. Quoting Henry Scougal, the seventeenth-century Scottish Episcopalian beloved by early evangelicals, Hartley wrote that the “secret mysteries of a new nature and divine life” were inexpressible in language, and could only be truly known “by those souls that are enkindled within, and awakened into the sense and relish of spiritual things” (369). Thomas Hartley, *Paradise Restored: or, a Testimony to the Doctrine of the Blessed Millennium* (London: Printed for M. Richardson, 1764).

¹² Psalm 19:1; see also Psalm 104:24: “O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.” The creation accounts of Genesis and Job 38 were also frequently cited sources of inspiration.

¹³ According to Calvin, the visible universe offers a kind of mirror of God, allowing his attributes to be discovered be more easily and accurately rather than through metaphysical speculation: “This skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible....” Quoted in Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 164. As Lewalski argues, in Calvin’s view humanity cannot

has argued that they also pruned the hedge, “eschewing both the fantastic allegorizations of the creatures characteristic of the medieval bestiaries, and also the notion of a meditative ascent from the creatures, to man, to God himself.”¹⁴ However, if early Protestants had scrapped the threefold ladder of divine ascent—*via purgativo*, *via illuminatio*, and *via unio*—by the seventeenth century, many were working hard to rebuild it.¹⁵ In an effort to spur popular piety at a moment of low confessional morale, Lutheran Pietists and English Puritans began to recover and recast medieval traditions of mystical progress to suit their own doctrinal sensibilities. Johann Arndt, the founder of Pietism and author of *True Christianity*, the most influential work of Protestant spirituality in history, engaged in a retrieval of medieval mysticism, including works by Angela da Foligno, Bernard of Clairvaux, Meister Eckhart, and Johann Tauler.¹⁶ As Bruce Hindmarsh writes, Arndt “built purgation, illumination, and union on the foundation of a Lutheran doctrine of regeneration and justification by faith.”¹⁷

Contemplative habits of reading nature were part and parcel of the “new life” that flowed from justification and the struggle to restore the image of God in humanity. In the first three books of *True Christianity*, Arndt focused on the drive to rekindle the divine spark

contemplate God directly because of the Fall, which destroyed the capacity to discern the spiritual significances in nature, “and therefore,” she writes, “made impossible the scale of meditative ascent described by Bonaventure and Bellarmine”—a capacity which Puritan and Pietist writers recovered and which, I argue, early evangelicals came to regard as the proper duty of the regenerate, though not a means of salvation.

¹⁴ Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics*, 162.

¹⁵ Following the move of W. R. Ward to extend the beginnings of the movement back into the seventeenth century, I include German Pietists such as Johann Arndt in the category of early evangelical. See Ward, *Early Evangelicalism*, 1–5.

¹⁶ Ward, *Early Evangelicalism*, 9.

¹⁷ Bruce D. Hindmarsh, “‘End of Faith as Its Beginning’: Models of Spiritual Progress in Early Evangelical Devotional Hymns,” *Spiritus* 10:1 (2010), 21.

in the hidden depths of the soul. The fourth book Arndt devoted in its entirety to the *liber naturalis* or book of nature. Microcosm and macrocosm, humanity and the universe, were yoked in lineaments of sympathy. “The signs and emblems present through nature become objects of contemplation and symbolic carriers of the divine,” argues Jonathan Strom. “Christ, as the incarnate word of logos, represents the spirit of God in creation and, as archetype of world and archetype of the human ideal, integrates the two as a symbolic analogy.” In such a way, Strom continues, “the imitation of Christ and the imitation of nature are closely interwoven.”¹⁸ Through contemplative engagement with a cosmos steeped in correspondences, the advanced believer could read the spiritual code stamped on every creature, and engage in the repair of the *imago dei* in humanity, the crown of creation.

Puritans in Old and New England engaged in similar work. The English Puritan John Flavell, in *Husbandry Spiritualized*, invited readers to “Make a ladder out of earthly materials,” using it for spiritual ascent to God. Flavell, evoking a similar relation of macrocosm to microcosm, described “the World below [as] a Glass to discover the World above; *Seculum est speculum*.”¹⁹ An even more important model for later evangelical forms of nature piety was Richard Baxter’s devotional manual, *The Saints Everlasting Rest*. Baxter advocated “occasional meditation,” which Charles Hambrick-Stowe has defined as a

¹⁸ Jonathan Strom, review of *Natura Sagax* by Hans-Peter Neumann, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 37.4 (Winter 2006), 1170.

¹⁹ Quoted in Belden Lane, “Two Schools of Desire: Nature and Marriage in Seventeenth-Century Puritanism,” *Church History* 69: 2 (2000), 387. Lane argues that by the end of the seventeenth century, the theme of desire began to fade in Puritan spirituality. The turn to Enlightenment, he suggests, made the bold eroticism of earlier work an embarrassment. Nevertheless, he locates the tradition as it survives in the work of Jonathan Edwards then jumps to its modern recovery by ecological poets such as Wendell Berry. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which the current study addresses, are notable gaps in Lane’s genealogy of this important devotional tradition.

daily practice “distinguished from regular meditation by its focus on a creature as subject rather than on a biblical text or spiritual idea.”²⁰ The contemplative, Baxter wrote, moves from explicitly affirmed contemplation of the visible creation as a choice means to contemplate heavenly realities:

The World is Gods book, which he set man at first to read; and every Creature is a Letter, or Syllable, or Word, or Sentence, more or less, declaring the name and will of God. There you may behold his wonderful Almightyness, his unsearchable Wisdom, his unmeasurable Goodness, mercy and compassions; and his singular regard of the sons of men!... Those that with holy and illuminated minds come thither to behold the footsteps of the Great and Wise and bountiful Creator, may find not only matter to *employ*, but to *profit* and *delight* their *thoughts!*²¹

Such spiritual training was typical of a spiritual elite in New England, for whom meditation was a duty as well as a delight. “At its most rigorous,” writes Hambrick-Stowe, “meditation led to being ‘possessed’ by God. Baxter described the experience as ‘the soul ravishing exercises of heavenly Contemplation.’”²²

Puritan and Pietist models of contemplative piety travelled to the New World along multiple routes. One path of transmission followed the German-speaking ministers and laypeople who immigrated to Pennsylvania and preached to young charges such as Benjamin Lakin and Christian Newcomer. These were a people infused with Pietist forms of spirituality inculcated at Halle, which accorded Arndt’s work a central place in the seventeenth-century revival of Lutheran piety.²³ Arndt also made his way into English-

²⁰ Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 164.

²¹ Quoted in Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics*, 165.

²² Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 168.

²³ On the publishing of Pietist and radical Pietist works in early Pennsylvania, especially Arndt’s *True Christianity* (which is treated in a separate appendix), see Heinz G. F.

speaking circles through Anthony W. Boehm, the Hallensian who in 1712 completed the first full English translation of *True Christianity* while serving as chaplain to Prince George, consort of Queen Anne. John Wesley was sufficiently moved by Arndt's piety to designate *True Christianity* as the inaugural volume of his Christian Library, his cheap reprint of spiritual classics intended to travel in the saddlebags of Methodist itinerants on the frontier. In later volumes, Wesley published abridgements of Flavell's *Husbandry Spiritualized* and Baxter's *Saints Everlasting Rest*.²⁴

Wesley also funneled mystical Pietism into the devotional culture of early evangelicalism through his translation of German hymns. His selections offer further evidence of a deliberate effort to link religious renewal with a vitalist sensibility of nature. For instance, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739) included Gerhard Tersteegen's "Lo, God Is Here." In Wesley's translation, the vitalist anthem presents God as an all-pervading, animating presence, perceptible to the regenerate senses of the believer.

Lo, God is here! Let us adore
And own how dreadful is this place!
Let all within us feel His power,
And silent bow before His face.

In Thee we move all things of Thee
Are full, Thou Source and Life of all;
Thou vast unfathomable sea!
Fall prostrate, lost in wonder fall.

Wilsdorf, *Early German-American Imprints* (New York: P. Lang, 1999). On the place of the occult in early Pennsylvania, see Elizabeth W. Fisher, "Prophecies and Revelations': German Cabbalists in Early Pennsylvania," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 109.3 (July 1985), 299–333; Patricia A. Ward, *Experimental Theology in America: Madame Guyon, Fénelon, and Their Readers* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 59–82.

²⁴ On the publication history of Baxter's *Saints Everlasting Rest* and its recovery by early evangelicals, see Frederick J. Powicke, "Story and Significance of the Rev. Richard Baxter's 'Saints' Everlasting Rest,'" *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library Manchester* 5 (1918/1920), 445–79.

As flowers their opening leaves display,
And glad drink in the solar fire,
So may we catch Thine every Ray,
And thus Thy influence inspire.²⁵

As W. R. Ward noted, the hymn “encapsulates Tersteegen’s reply to both the early Enlightenment which seemed to be exiling God from his universe, and the physico-theologians who could only bring Him back at the end of a long argument.”²⁶ Rather than appeal to the design of nature as evidence of God’s existence or characteristics, Tersteegen invoked God as a felt presence, a boundless sea or pervasive, radiating fire, in which all things move and have their being. Vital piety fed and flowed from a vital sense of the natural world as enlivened by divine presence.

“Through Nature Up to Nature’s God”: Morphologies of Spiritual Progress

Time and again in their journals and letters, evangelicals describe the movement of ascent through practices of contemplation as a journey “from nature up to nature’s God.” Borrowed from Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Man* (1734), the poem celebrates the man or woman who is:

Slave to no sect, who takes no private road,
But looks through Nature up to Nature’s God;
Pursues that chain which links the immense design,
Joins heaven and earth, and mortal and divine;
Sees, that no being any bliss can know,
But touches some above, and some below;
Learns, from this union of the rising whole,

²⁵ John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: printed by William Strahan; and sold by James Hutton; and at Mr. Bray’s, 1739), 189. The German original, *Gott ist gegenwartig*, was first published in Tersteegen’s *Geistliches Blumgartlein* (1729). For the influence of the hymns of Gerhard Tersteegen on John Wesley, see John L. Nuelson, *John Wesley and the German Hymns* (Calberley: A. S. Holbrook, 1972).

²⁶ Ward, *Early Evangelicalism*, 59.

The first, last purpose of the human soul;
And knows, where faith, law, morals, all began,
All end, in love of God, and love of man.²⁷

Pope's work communicates a number of features of evangelical nature piety. First is the way in which observation and contemplation of nature was deemed ecumenical, a way of overcoming sectarian divides. The close observer of nature is "slave to no sect." Natural religion resonated with early evangelicals, who blamed theological scholasticism and doctrinal divisions for the loss of vital piety in Protestant churches, and who sought to return a sense of energy and mission through appealing to a "true Christianity" that was theologically streamlined, practical, and focused on personal conversion and the cultivation of heart piety. For eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Protestants, natural religion offered a platform for cooperation across denominational lines that trumped theological differences. Like the church itself, nature constituted a "rising whole" that found its beginning and end in God. Pope was clear to distinguish this spiritual vision from enthusiasm, what he called the "private road." Contemplation did not avail itself of prophecies or novel revelations. Piety directed toward the works of creation was public, communal, and anchored in a sense of nature as the moving image of eternity.

Yet, when evangelicals spoke of looking through nature up to nature's God, they meant something more than the abstract deism of Pope. By reinvigorating the method of divine analogy on which Medieval and Renaissance cosmology had rested (and which the Enlightenment had eroded), evangelicals read nature as a means to spiritual progress and transformation.²⁸ For evangelicals, it was not enough that nature revealed the divine

²⁷ Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man and Other Poems* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1994), 77–8.

attributes to the mind but that they made God present in the heart, rendering the transcendent sensible and perceptible. In contrast with the grand, distant mechanism of deism, evangelicals pursued sustained intimacy with a god made flesh.²⁹

For earlier Christians, contemplation of the visible creation had furnished two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of self and knowledge of God. Puritans, Lewalski has argued, read the book of nature “emblematically, as a rich source of moral lessons and *exempla* which the meditator should derive and apply to his own life; and symbolically, as sacramental objects invested by God with significances which may reveal something about God to the meditator.”³⁰ The contemplative piously devised the first class, while regarding the second as a class of revelation akin to scripture itself. Evangelicals did something very similar. Their efforts to read the creation as a book of symbols manifesting the divine reveal a pattern or morphology of spiritual progress. This morphology moved through the visible creation into the hidden potentialities of supernature, signaled in the shift from knowledge of self to knowledge to God.

²⁸ On the decline of the analogical reasoning during the Enlightenment, see Earl R. Wasserman, “Nature Moralized: Divine Analogy in the Eighteenth Century,” *English Literary History* 20.1 (March 1953), 39–76.

²⁹ The surprising popularity of Pope’s *Essay on Man* among nineteenth-century evangelicals is evidence of the eclecticism of early evangelical culture, which included perhaps a willingness to creatively misinterpret the work of others, appropriating and repurposing potentially heterodoxical works to serve traditional doctrines and practices. Evangelicals read *The Essay on Man* much as the eighteenth-century Bishop William Warburton. Warburton argued that, when Pope claimed that we can know God only by what we know of the world, he was simply plying the ancient method of divine analogy, arguing “from the *visible Things* of God, in this System” to “demonstrate the *invisible Things* of God, his *eternal Power and Godhead*.” Quoted in Earl R. Wasserman, “Nature Moralized: Divine Analogy in the Eighteenth Century,” *English Literary History* 20.1 (March 1953), 54. See chapter three for another instance of this habit: Caroline Matilda Thayer’s defense of the poetry of another eighteenth-century deist, Erasmus Darwin.

³⁰ Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics*, 162.

By morphology I mean not a path worked out systematically, like the famous Puritan morphologies of conversion.³¹ I intend, rather, something more like a set of thematic trajectories, not all of which might be present in any one subject, and many of which may overlap at any given time. In addition to the two trajectories I've already suggested (from nature to supernature, and from knowledge of self to knowledge to God), there were others. Evangelicals commonly noted experiencing a shift from prayer to praise, and from absence to presence. They also note a shift in the experience of God, moving from omnipotent creator to loving preserver or friend, with an accompanying change of feeling from fear to love.

Jeremiah Ingalls expresses this natural theology of divine immanence in “Honor to the Hills,” a hymn included in his early revivalist hymnal, *The Christian Harmony*, published in New Hampshire in 1805.

Through all this world below, God we see all around,
Search hills and valleys through, there he's found;
In growing fields of corn, the lily and the thorn,
The pleasant and forlorn, All declare God is there;
In meadows drest in green, There he's seen.

From fields, hills, and valleys, the hymn moves on to consider God's presence in the waters of the earth:

See springing waters rise, fountains flow, rivers run;
The mist beclouds the sky, hides the sun:
Then down the rain doth pour, the ocean it doth roar,
And break upon the shore, all to praise, in their lays,
A God that ne'er declines his designs.

Having surveyed all spheres of life, from land to sea, to sky, the hymn concludes with an invitation to join the choirs of heaven and earth in unceasing praise of God, whose

³¹ On the Puritan morphology of conversion, see Edmund Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

presence fills all things:

Then let my station be, here in life, where I see
The sacred trinity all agree,
In all the works he's made, the forest and the glade,
Nor let me be afraid, though I dwell in the hill,
Where nature's works declare God is there.³²

In Ingalls' view, humanity had not been abandoned to a world of clever designs. Nature's works inspired not fear but a comforting sense of divine presence. From one's earthly station, the singer joined a choir of creatures engaged in the work of unceasing praise. Through such efforts in contemplative ascent, believers progressed from a stance of distant observer to intimate participant, surrendering the will and blending with nature's harmony in ways that blurred without eliminating individual voices. While such efforts took a variety of paths, all began in a simple act of retirement and separation from the world.

Separation from the World, Retirement into Nature, and the Love of God

Patterns of periodic retreat into nature for prayer, meditation, and contemplation were motivated by a variety of reasons. Many itinerants used the long days of lonely passage across interminable stretches of woods, swampland, and mountainous terrain as a

³² Jeremiah Ingalls, *The Christian Harmony; Or, Songster's Companion* (Exeter, N. H.: Henry Ranlet, 1805), 47–8. In his opening advertisement, Ingalls wrote that he intended his worship book “for the use of Christians of all denominations.” David Klocko observes that, while Ingalls drew hymns from a variety of denominational hymnbooks, including Separatist Baptists, he omitted those most characteristic of Baptist doctrines, likely to avoid alienating non-Baptists. Hymns that draw on natural imagery make up a significant number in the collection, suggesting that John H. Brooke's argument that an important function of natural theology was to brook confessional conflicts among Protestants, applies to the American as well as the British context, and to groups other than scientists. See David G. Klocko, “Jeremiah Ingalls's *The Christian Harmony: Or, Songster's Companion* (1805),” doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1978.

time of prayer and preparation, a means of “redeeming” the time lost to travel. At least some, however, turned this practical necessity of the job into a cherished ritual, a kind of portable prayer closet. Natural space represented a symbolic counterpoint to settled society, which was identified with worldly temptation.³³ On the road to Charleston, Thomas Coke met up with Francis Asbury and was pleased to find the journey a time of spiritual refreshment. “The lofty Pine-trees through which we rode for a considerable part of the way, cast such a pleasing gloom over the country, that I felt myself perfectly shut up from the busy world, at the same time that I was ranging through immeasurable forests,” Coke wrote.³⁴ Separation from the world was a prerequisite for what evangelicals called the love of God, uniting with Christ through prayer. Coke, a short, corpulent Welshman who kept extensive records of his travels in North America and the Caribbean, wrote while on his way to Savannah, Georgia, in March 1791, “It is one of my most delicate entertainments,” he wrote, “to embrace every opportunity of ingulphing myself (if I may so express it) in the woods. I seem then to be detached from every thing but the quiet vegetable creation, and MY GOD.”³⁵

Hannah Syng Bunting, a young Methodist born in 1801 to a prosperous Philadelphia family and raised by Quakers, took a similar view. After strolling the woods adjoining a camp meeting in Pennington, New Jersey, Bunting wrote, “I have had many

³³ In eighteenth-century New England, David Brainerd experienced nature as an insulating force that separated him from the world. Walking into a grove, Brainerd wrote that he felt “more as a stranger on earth, I think, than ever before; dead to any of the enjoyments of the world as if I had been dead in a natural sense.” Edwards, *Diary of David Brainerd*, 78.

³⁴ Thomas Coke, *Extracts of the Journals of the Late Rev. Thomas Coke, L.L.D.* (Dublin: R. Napper for the Methodist Book-Room, 1816), 245.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

a solitary walk in this extensive wood, and have loved to ascend yonder high mountain which commands so extensive a view. Under the thick foliage of these trees I feel the world excluded, every passion hushed, and enjoy a calm intercourse with Heaven. Surely safety and tranquillity dwell remote from the multitude.”³⁶

Once separated from the world, the believer began her devotions in earnest. Sometimes this took the form of meditation upon a passage of scripture or devotional work. Coke, for instance, was fond of reading Thomas à Kempis while riding through the woods on horseback.³⁷ Others read scripture or sang hymns. Alternatively, devotional attention could begin with a feature in the landscape itself. While Benjamin Lakin was crossing Virginia’s Blue Ridge mountains on November 24, 1795, he took time to scribble in his journal: “It is a matter of contemplation to see the lofty mountains.”³⁸ Lakin, a Methodist circuit-rider from Maryland and southwestern Pennsylvania, may have been led to this conclusion by Wesley’s abridgement of the Puritan Richard Baxter. Two months prior, Lakin had been reading *Saints’ Everlasting Rest* when he noted experiencing the “power of the Lord” descend upon him and awaken a spiritual sense of things:

³⁶ T. Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Miss Hannah Syng Bunting*, 2 vols. (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, for the Sunday school union of the Methodist Episcopal church, 1837), I: 129. Billy Hibbard similarly described his regular practice of retreating to the woods on the Sabbath “to spend the day in reading and prayer.” See Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel* (Printed for and published by the author. J. C. Totten, printer, 1825), 88.

³⁷ Coke, *Journals*, 228.

³⁸ “The Journal of Benjamin Lakin,” in William Warren Sweet, ed., *Religion on the American Frontier, Vol. 4, The Methodists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 213.

“Heaven was opened in my soul,” he wrote. “Everything appeared to look of a heavenly nature. I seem’d empty of all things and fill’d with God.”³⁹

For those tied to home and unable to travel, periods of retreat and prayer were often associated with a favored local spot. William Walker’s “Bower of Prayer,” included in his Baptist tune book, *The Southern Harmony*, described a daily habit of retreat into nature for prayer and contemplation. The hymn hits several themes in evangelical practices of nature: the tension between retreat from the world (love of God) and activist engagement (love of neighbor); a vital nature engaged in unceasing prayer; a peak experience of ecstasy or rapture; and the tension between a localization sense of the sacred and the universal presence of Christ in creation. The opening verse describes separation from loved ones as a spiritual joy rather than as a neglect of Christian duty, since the time is spent not in selfish secular entertainments but in communion with Christ.

To leave my dear friends, and with neighbors to part,
And go from my home, it afflicts not my heart,
Like thoughts of absenting myself for a day
From that bless’d retreat where I’ve chosen to pray.

Dear bow’r where the pine and the poplar have spread,
And wove, with their branches, a roof o’er my head,
How oft have I knelt on the evergreen there,
And pour’d out my soul to my Saviour in prayer.

In the next verse, the bower becomes a church, with birdsong in place of congregational singing.

The early shrill notes of the loved nightingale

³⁹ Ibid., 211. British Methodists were equally inspired by Wesley’s rediscovery of this Puritan devotional classic. In a journal entry for September 1809, Mary Cooper described reading *Saints Everlasting Rest* while on a two-month visit to the English seaside. Noting Baxter’s affirmation of “consideration” or meditation on the natural world as a “chief help” to the contemplation of heavenly things,” she applied the lesson to a lightning storm on the sea. See Adam Clark, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Mary Cooper* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1819), 63–4.

That dwelt in my bower, I observed as my bell,
To call me to duty, while birds of the air
Sing anthems of praises, as I went to prayer.

At the peak of the service, the contemplative finds God's presence in an experience of communion or rapture.

For Jesus, my Saviour, oft deign't there to meet,
And bless'd with his presence my humble retreat
Oft fill'd me with rapture and blessedness there,
Inditing, in heaven's own language, my prayer.

In the final verse, the singer prepares to leave the bower and return to serve Christ in the world, reassured by the promise of his universal presence in the creation.

Dear bower, I must leave you and bid you adieu,
And pay my devotions in parts that are new,
For Jesus, my Saviour, resides everywhere,
And can, in all places, give answer to prayer.⁴⁰

Mary Moody Emerson, a devout Congregationalist and aunt to Ralph Waldo, patterned a similar form of punctuated retreat to cultivate a sense of the divine presence.

As David R. Williams writes,

⁴⁰ William Walker, *The Southern Harmony, and Musical Companion* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 70. Walker attributes "Bower of Prayer" to himself and "Richerson." Walker's evangelical piety can be contrasted with Emily Dickinson, whose 1861 poem describes devotion to nature as supplanting rather than supporting orthodox congregational worship: "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church-/I keep it, staying at Home—/With a Bobolink for a Chorister—/And an Orchard, for a Dome." (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 106). Walker and Dickinson both imagine nature as church with birds serving as bell-ringers and choristers. The differences, though, are striking. While Dickinson pits formal, corporate worship against the spontaneous worship of creation Walker presents retreat into the bower as complementing corporate worship. A second difference concerns the proper object and focus of worship. Dickinson rejects the orthodox Christian God in favor of the cult of nature. The business of formal religious worship, she argues, is delayed gratification: a life spent listening to long sermons in the hope of joys to come. Nature's church places the worshipper in a heaven on earth. In contrast, Walker presents Christ as the end of worship in the bower. Heavenly joy is not delayed, but neither is it lasting. Communion with Christ is fleeting, driven by a cyclical pattern of desire and consummation, presence and absence. Only in the future state might be divine presence be felt without punctuation.

The feeling of being lost in God came to her most frequently, she claimed, at Elmvale, her farm in Maine, where the Divinity was felt as seldom elsewhere. She valued her “years of privation...in the beautiful wilderness.” Time, she wrote, is but “an image of Eternity,” and “in the stillness of the wilderness where God hath built at midnight—it thus becomes undefiled.”⁴¹

After a lengthy retirement in the bower, return to society could come as a shock. When Hannah Bunting returned from her day’s ride to a popular New Jersey resort and saw hundreds dancing on the green, her keen religious sentiment was offended. “With what different feelings should I have viewed the scene,” she wrote, “if this lovely spot was rendered sacred, by happy multitudes coming under these lofty boughs for prayer and praise to the God of nature.” The sight spurred Bunting to double her efforts at attaining ceaseless prayer, a state of total surrender to the divine will. “Lord, I want to feel nothing but thee, to see nothing but thee, to think of nothing but thee; whether in the temple or the grove, whether in society or solitude.”⁴²

Christian Newcomer, an itinerant preacher in the United Brethren in Christ, had a similar response. When the German-speaking former carpenter and farmer from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, lodged at a public house after a long day’s ride through the woods, he became so upset by the drinking and profanity he encountered that he abandoned it for a nearby orchard. There he “kneeled under an apple tree, and prayed

⁴¹ David R. Williams, “The Wilderness Rapture of Mary Moody Emerson: One Calvinist Link to Transcendentalism,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1986), 6–7. For Moody’s view of nature, see Phyllis Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴² Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Hannah Syng Bunting*, 156. English Methodist Mary Cooper furnishes another example. On October 5, 1809 After spending two months at a seaside resort, much of it strolling along the cliffs and sands, Cooper wrote in her diary, “my heart now exults with praise to God that so much of my enjoyment has been derived from love to Him and His works. Whenever I have sought retirement I have found it: hence the bustle and gayety of the place have not offended me.” Clark, *Memoirs of Mary Cooper*, 72.

that the Lord, for Jesus' sake, would have mercy on them."⁴³ Though Newcomer was a native German speaker, in his extensive travels may have become familiar with the popular hymn, "The Appletree." First set to music in Jeremiah Ingalls's *Christian Harmony* (and included in a number of later revivalist hymnals), the hymn turned to the Song of Songs for inspiration, taking the humble apple as an emblem of Christ, the tree of life:

The tree of life, my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit and always green;
The trees of nature fruitless be,
Compar'd with Christ, the appletree.

The spiritual weariness of the pilgrim found relief in communion with Christ, using an image familiar to everyday farmers.

I'll sit and eat the fruit divine,
It cheers my heart like spir'tual wine
And now this fruit is sweet to me,
That grows on Christ the appletree.

By appealing to images common to agricultural life, poets and hymn writers encouraged their readers to form a picture of the invisible reality that lay behind the images. Through contemplation of the apple tree, the seeker could climb to higher boughs, culminating in a vision of Christ inhospitable to language but clearly seen by the eyes of faith.

This beauty doth all things excel,
By faith I know, but ne'er can tell,
The glory which I now can see,
In Jesus Christ the appletree.⁴⁴

⁴³ Christian Newcomer, *Life and Journal of the Reverend Christian Newcomer*, ed. John Hildt (Hagerstown, Md.: F. G. W. Kapp, 1834), 76.

⁴⁴ Ingalls, *Christian Harmony*, 81–2. Song of Songs 32:3–5: "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love." David Klocko suggests that "R. H.," the unknown author of the hymn, may

Like the tree, the sun was a common, ancient emblem in the contemplative arsenal of Christianity. For centuries, believers had spiritualized the daily setting of the sun to represent the promise of resurrection. One Sunday evening, David Brainerd was “viewing the light in the north” following a day of prayer and contemplation in which he felt “some sweetness in the thoughts of arriving at the heavenly world,” when he suddenly felt “delighted in the contemplation on the glorious morning of the resurrection.”⁴⁵ Two eighteenth-century Salzburger who were making their way to Georgia described the fading light in similar terms. “The setting sun presented such a magnificent view on the water and in the sky that one could only admire but not describe it. We reflected that if the creation is this beautiful, how beautiful must be its Creator!”⁴⁶ Contemplation of common signs in nature produced a depth of feeling at which language could only hint.

How Far Did Nature Fall?

In the morphology of spiritual progress after conversion (like that of conversion itself), knowledge of self preceded knowledge of God. Knowledge of self meant awakening to one’s dire condition apart from God, a process of stripping away illusions concerning the destiny of the unregenerate soul, or the soul that slackened in its striving after God. In

have opted for the image of the apple tree over more common natural symbols for Christ (lamb, for instance) out of a sense that the “image of the lamb appropriate to biblical shepherds had become time-worn and needed to be replaced by a fresh image more appropriate to farmers.” See Klocko, “Jeremiah Ingalls’s *The Christian Harmony*,” 226.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Life of David Brainerd*, 78.

⁴⁶ “The Travel Diary of Two Pastors Messrs. Boltzius and Gronau Which the Two Have Kept from Halle to Georgia and for Some time After Their Arrival in That Land,” *Detailed Reports on the Salzburger Emigrants Who Settled in America*, ed. George Fenwick Jones, trans. Herman J. Lacher (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1968), 40.

these daily practices of self-examination, evangelicals drew instruction and correction from the natural world, which offered constant evidence of the fall and the effects of human sin. While evangelicals routinely celebrated the beauty and order of the natural world, such praise was balanced by sober meditation on signs of disorder and decay. When Thomas Coke spent the day riding along the river Dan near Dick's Ferry, Virginia, his enjoyment of the "beauties of nature" was interrupted by the sight of a "great, cruel hawk, who was devouring a little squirrel on a rock." Such sights of natural violence and disorder frequently stirred up thoughts of the fall and human sin. For Hannah Bunting, no landscape was too humble to inspire contemplation of her spiritual condition. While riding one morning, the sight of a garden filled with weeds moved her to ponder what she called "the state of the natural heart." She wrote, "It led me to ask what I should be were it not for transforming grace."⁴⁷

Like other Protestant primers of the period, J. F. Martinet's *Catechism of Nature*, published in Boston in 1790, taught children to balance the doctrines of flower and thorn, original goodness and resultant corruption.

Pupil. What may I expect to find in the works of God?

Tutor. Whatever is wise; great, good, and perfect. God beheld every thing that he had made, and saw that it was good.

Pupil. And they continue so?

Tutor. All, to this day, answer the designs of the Creator, if we except the change which the fall occasioned.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Hannah Syng Bunting*, 160.

⁴⁸ J. F. Martinet, *The Catechism of Nature: for the use of Children* (Boston: Printed by Young and Etheridge, 1793), 7. Johannes Florentius (Jan Floris) Martinet was a Reformed minister and natural philosopher in Zutphen, Holland. His works were translated into English and reprinted with great frequency in America throughout the nineteenth century. According to my count, 22 American editions were printed between 1790 and 1818. In 1845, Martinet's work became a major source text for William Yates's *Elements of natural philosophy and natural history, in a series of familiar dialogues. For the instruction of Indian youth*, an edition of which was published by the American Ceylon Mission in Manephy.

There, unfortunately, lay the rub. How far did nature fall? Christian answers varied widely in terms of how it interpreted the extent and severity of the curse's effects on creation. All antebellum evangelicals agreed that that nature was innocent in the fall and had suffered as a result. Where they differed lay in the relative balance each gave to signs of an original blessing or an original curse.

A comparison of two hymns included in William Walker's *Southern Harmony, and Musical Companion* reveals the twofold view of nature as paradise and ruin: "Lovely Vine" (also known as "The Garden Hymn"), and "The Mouldering Vine." While "Lovely Vine" imagined the growth and spread of the kingdom of God on earth through a vine whose "circling branches rise" across a "desert ground" and whose "blossoms shoot and promise fruit," "The Mouldering Vine" reminded believers that the way of all things is death and decay.

See all nature fading, dying!
 Silent all things seem to pine;
Life from vegetation flying,
 Brings to mind "the mould'ring vine."

See! in yonder forest standing,
 Lofty cedars, how they nod!
Scenes of nature how surprising,
 Read in nature nature's God.
Whilst the annual frosts are creeping,
 Leaves and tendrils from the trees,
So our friends are early drooping,
 We are like to one of these.⁴⁹

In Christian tradition, images of temporality and decay in nature were indissolubly tied to memories of the fall, the event that according to the biblical narrative,

⁴⁹ Walker, *The Southern Harmony*, 87.

first ushered death into the creation. In the judgment of Genesis 3, Adam's sin led God to pronounce a curse upon the earth:

cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.⁵⁰

As Marjorie Hope Nicholson has shown, beginning in the Middle Ages and accelerating during the Reformation, the notion of decay as punishment gradually transferred from an exclusive focus on human nature to the external natural world more generally—"to *terra*" or the earth in a broad sense, Nicholson writes, "as distinguished from *humus*" or the surface soil, which, in the Genesis account, becomes resistant to cultivation, turning up thorns and thistles and forcing humans to trade mere survival for lives of suffering, sweat, and toil. The marks of punishment on the landscape were believed most visible in the earth's variety of topography, especially in the "heights of mountains and depths of ocean." By the late sixteenth century, the curse's outer ring threatened to extend beyond the sublunary world when astronomical observations suggested "the possibility of degeneration in the heavenly bodies—not only of man and of the earth, but of the cosmos." Still, Nicholson points out, at each point when theologians sought to extend the reach of nature's fall, others pushed back, asserting the essential goodness of creation, evidenced in its order, beauty, and design.⁵¹

The Protestant reformers disagreed about how to read the signs of decay in nature. For Martin Luther, the creation, while innocent in itself, "is nevertheless

⁵⁰ Genesis 3:17–19.

⁵¹ Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959), 111–112.

compelled to bear sin's curse." The beauty of the original earth, Nicholson writes, "began to fade from external nature at the time of the Fall of Adam and continued to disappear in progressive stages of degeneration." All creatures, Luther writes, "were deformed by sin and remain deformed still.... yea, even the sun and the moon, have as it were put on sackcloth." Though originally good, "they have become defiled and noxious." As human sin increased, so did the weight of the curse, which leached down like a pollutant from the surface soil to infect the entire creation until God released his wrath in the global deluge, whose waters carved out the mountains as a reminder of the wages of sin. Luther's pessimism about the extent of the curse on creation continued to grow in step with his millennial pessimism over the course of his life. In a world of constant flux, sin and wrath were the only constants.⁵²

For John Calvin, by comparison, the natural world came out of the third chapter of Genesis more rose than thorn. In contrast to philosophers and theologians who asserted that "the earth is exhausted by the long succession of time, as if constant bringing forth had wearied it," Calvin argued that the "remaining blessing of God" was "gradually diminished and impaired" only by the "increasing wickedness of man." The "whole punishment" of the fall, Calvin wrote, was exacted "not from the earth itself, but from man alone."⁵³ This theological disagreement played out in terms of how the reformers contemplated the spiritual significance of creation. While Luther saw only judgment and wrath when he looked upon the mountains, Calvin believed that if humanity, Nicholson writes, "failed to appreciate these or any other evidence of God's handiwork, the

⁵² Ibid., 102.

⁵³ Ibid., 99.

fault...was not in nature but in man's 'lapsed condition.'"⁵⁴ The problem lay in subjective human perception, not in objective nature.

Reformation-era debates over the extent of the deleterious effects of the fall on creation made their way down a variety of avenues into early American culture. Most evangelicals would have agreed with William Cullen Bryant's assertion that the "primal curse"

Fell, it is true, upon the unsinning earth
But not in vengeance.⁵⁵

However, they remained divided over whether irregular topography furnished evidence of an original blessing or an original curse. While riding through the Crawford Notch in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, the Connecticut Congregational minister Timothy Dwight sited the "narrow defile, extending two miles in length between two huge cliffs" and read it as a painful reminder of divine retribution for sin. The Notch, he wrote, appeared to have been "rent asunder by some vast convulsion of nature," whose origin was "unquestionably that of the deluge."⁵⁶ For Dwight, the sight of the Notch would likely have awakened thoughts of sin and judgment, calling him to ponder his own shortcomings in the sight of God.

For Jeremiah Ingalls, the cooper and Congregational choirmaster who lived on the other side of the White Mountains in Newbury, Vermont, due west of Crawford Notch, contemplation of the topographical irregularities of New England drew a more

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁵ Washington Irving, ed. *Poems of William Cullen Bryant* (London: J. Andrews, 1832), 134.

⁵⁶ Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New-York*, Vol. 2, (London: Printed for William Baynes and Son, 1823), 134. For the influence of Crawford Notch on antebellum landscape painting, see Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology and American Landscape Painting, 1825–1875* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

positive reaction. In “Honor to the Hills,” Ingalls listed scriptural encounters with the divine presence on mountains: Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Sinai; Christ’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor, night vigil on the Mount of Olives, and crucifixion on Golgotha. For Ingalls, such experiences mitigated the ancient associations between irregular terrain and divine wrath.

Since the hills are honor’d thus, by our Lord in his course,
Let them not be by us call’d a curse;
Forbid it mighty King, but rather let us sing,
While hills and vallies ring; echoes fly through the sky,
And heaven hears the sound from the ground.⁵⁷

In Vermont’s verdant hills, Ingalls intimated more blessing than curse.⁵⁸ The curse had done little to dim the light of the first paradise. In this case, evangelical primitivism cohered with a broader cultural reappraisal of mountains as more than “tumours” or “blisters” scarring the landscape as reminders of the fall. As Calvin had suggested, ugliness was in the eye of the beholder, not in God’s handiwork.

⁵⁷ Ingalls, *Christian Harmony*, 47–8.

⁵⁸ Presbyterians and Congregationalists broadly agreed that the earth showed evidence of the fall and deluge. However, many underplayed the extent to which these events had damaged God’s spiritual presence in creation. In 1851, *The Religious Herald*, a Virginia Baptist newspaper, published an excerpt from a work by James McCosh, the Presbyterian clergyman, common-sense philosopher, and president of Princeton University. In an exegesis of John 1:9, McCosh, a postmillennialist, argued that the “light of divinity...as far as the light of nature ever revealed them, shines as brightly, this moment, over the whole world, Pagan as well as Christian, as it did in the day when it first dawned on the virgin creation, when the ‘morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.’” James McCosh, “The True Light,” *The Religious Herald*, May 29, 1851. Edward Hitchcock, geologist, Congregational clergyman, and president of Amherst College, took a similar view. “Every thing which man’s harpy fingers have touched bears the defilement of sin,” he wrote; “but nature is untarnished, and her virgin robe reminds us of that which she wore in the bowers of Eden. And therefore does the Christian love nature.” Edward Hitchcock, *Religious Truth Illustrated from Science* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1857), 272.

Others offered a more sobering assessment of the disorder and decay visited upon the natural world by human sin. Joseph A. Seiss, a Lutheran pastor from Philadelphia and early adopter of dispensational premillennialism, peered into nature and saw not a palace but a ruin. “Not only man, and his surroundings in life,” wrote Seiss, “but his very dwelling-place—the earth itself—is infected. There is disorder attaching to the very rocks and ground on which we tread. Going back to God’s reckoning with Adam, we there find it written, ‘Cursed is the ground for thy sake.’” The book of nature, like biblical history, revealed a narrative of decline. “A blur has come upon the beauty of the world, and a corroding leprosy into all its elements, and discord into its pristine harmony.”⁵⁹ Seiss’s emphasis on the fallen state of nature accords with a general sensibility of cultural pessimism inherent in nascent fundamentalist circles, which began to gain traction in America in the 1870s. Depending on whether one read history as a tale of the universal progress of Christianity through global missions and moral reform or of its inevitable fall into apostasy and the persecution of the saints, the same vine could appear “lovely” or “moldering.”

But one should avoid overstating the case. During the antebellum period at least, millennial positions remained remarkably fluid; few found it necessary to articulate in any systematic sense of a postmillennial penchant for beauty and order that was separable from a premillennial predilection for an aesthetic of catastrophe and ruin. Rather, evangelicals seem to have appealed to the categories of order and disorder as the need suited them. Like scripture, the book of nature was sufficiently varied in its contents to support a range of theological positions, many of them contradictory, many of them held simultaneously. The poetry of Joseph Seiss offers a case study of such tensions. In “A

⁵⁹ Joseph A. Seiss, *Holy Types* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1859), 273.

Song of the Sea,” the restless movement of the deep held a mirror to fallen human nature:

It sighs, and chafes, and moans, and never rests;
Impatiently it chides the rigid shores,
And upward strives, without the strength to rise. [...]
With all its brightness, still it seems oppressed,
As if some inner grief, unseen, untold,
Lay lodged and leaden on its secret heart;—
The moan goes on, the unrest never stops.⁶⁰

The waves, “dreaming of their native home,” leaped “in hope of some translation...some grand redemption which shall set them free,” recalling Paul’s sense that “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together,” awaiting its future deliverance.⁶¹

While the sea brought Seiss to knowledge of human depravity, it is also ushered him into the divine presence. The sea’s “celestial aims and lineaments,” he wrote, established linkages of correspondence between earth and heaven, making it superior to land as a site for conversing with “celestial potencies.” It was “full of awful Deity,” a “Tabernacle of Infinity,” and “God’s Almighty in thinnest veil, / The dreadest nearness of His unseen Self.”⁶² The sea both sung and sighed.

⁶⁰ Joseph A. Seiss, *Recreation Songs* (Philadelphia: George W. Frederick, 1878), 32. The collection is also the source of the popular evangelical hymn “Fairest Lord Jesus,” which Seiss translated from the German original, attributed to a seventeenth-century Jesuit, and titled “A Song to the Saviour.” The hymn celebrates nature’s beauty as an image of the beauty of Christ (18):

Fair are the meadows, fair are the woodlands,
Robed in the flowers of blooming spring;
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer,
He makes our sorrowing spirit sing.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 33–4.

Nature and the State of Unceasing Prayer

During one trip to the Pennsylvania countryside, Hannah Syng Bunting awoke to the sound of birds outside her bedroom window. She felt inspired but also upbraided by the creatures who, she wrote, “Praise their Maker all they can, / And shame the silent tongue of man.”⁶³ The creation’s state of unceasing praise to God is a pervasive theme of evangelical devotional life. Quite apart from any deleterious effects of the fall, evangelical piety stressed nature’s unremitting faithfulness, a state of simple submission that contrasted with the sloth and prevarication of the human spirit.

Precedents to such attitudes abounded in works of Puritan practical divinity. In *The Creatures praising God*, Godfrey Goodman wrote that “The creatures have and display all the elements of a natural religion, a creed, a praise and service to God, a vocal prayer or liturgy, a law and a sacramental system,” and that “contemplation of these things reveals to us what our spiritual religion should be.”⁶⁴ The work of Richard Baxter stressed similar links between contemplation, congregational singing, and a state of ceaseless prayer, recovering what Colleen McDannell has called “the Augustinian emphasis on everlasting praise.” In contrast to certain medieval theologies, in which divine praise was considered the work of angels, and the reformers’ lack of interest in the subject, Baxter infused his work with references to the divine liturgy in the book of Revelation, creating what McDannell describes as “a heavenly life filled with song and praise.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Hannah Syng Bunting*, 77. The quotation is from “Listening to a Lark,” by Nathaniel Cotton.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics*, 165.

⁶⁵ Colleen McDannell, *Heaven: A History*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 173. Though McDannell cites the influence of Augustine, an important earlier proponent of unceasing prayer in the Christian tradition was the fourth-century Egyptian

Writing in *The Millennial Harbinger* in 1840, John Harris evoked contemplation's eschatological import. Linking Christ's first and second comings, Psalms and Revelation, Harris argued that every star in the night sky, perceived in its proper spiritual light, was a "star of Bethlehem" capable of guiding pilgrims, like the Three Kings, "into the divine presence":

The stars in their courses fight against irreligion. Each of them obediently followed, is a star of Bethlehem—a guide into the divine presence...and all of them unite—yes, this is the real music of the spheres, the chorus of creation—all of them unite in praising his eternal power and godhead. In the estimation of the Psalmist, the creation is a vast temple, and often did he summon the creatures and join them in a universal song of praise. And John heard the chorus. The noise and din of a distracted world may drown their voices here; "But," saith he, "every creature which in heaven and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them heard I, saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb forever." Thus nature, with all her myriad voices, is ever making affirmation and oath of the divine existence, and filling the universe with the echo of his praise.⁶⁶

To rise above the din of a distracted world and enter the endless prayer of creation took practice and effort. Revival hymns encouraged congregants to visualize themselves merging their voices with the choirs of the animal and vegetable creation. For example, "Lovely Vine" affirmed the faithfulness of creation in praising God without ceasing, a capacity apparently undimmed by the Fall:

Ye insects, feeble race,
And fish that glide the stream;
Ye birds that fly secure on high,

monk, John Cassian, whose *Conferences* helped to shape monastic practice in the West. Cassian's method of unceasing prayer, a combination of biblical meditation and monologistic prayer, was adopted by Benedict, who introduced it into the daily liturgy of the hours and the weekly blessing of the table servers, thereby ensuring its transmission and influence throughout the Middle Ages. See Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 110–113.

⁶⁶ John Harris, "Testimony of the Material World," *The Millennial Harbinger* 4.12 (Dec. 1840), 570.

Repeat the joyful theme.

Ye beasts that feed at home,
Or roam the valleys round;
With lofty voice proclaim the joys,
And join the pleasant sound.

Humanity, shamed by its comparison with “feeble nature,” is invited to join the unending divine liturgy:

Shall feeble nature sing,
And man not join the lays?
O may their throats be swell’d with notes,
And fill’d with songs of praise.⁶⁷

In her poem, *Wilderness and Mount*, Ellen Harvey echoed Ingalls’s passion for joining with insect choirs. Harvey celebrated the annual camp meeting as a place where nature and humanity were temporarily restored to concord with one another and with God.

Here is the field: the insects in the grass
Sing praise as by their little tents we pass.
They are in harmony with all God’s move:
Ah! why can man do any less than love?⁶⁸

Nature became a spiritual training ground where the soul could practice new forms of piety until they became as reflexive as breath, until they became second nature.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ingalls, *Christian Harmony*, 1. “Honor to the Hills,” from the same collection, raised the contemplative eye from earth to the skies and described how sun, moon, stars, and comets declare God’s “dreadful name” (48):

The sun with all his rays, speaks of God as he flies;
The comet in his blaze, God it cries.
The shining of the stars, the moon when she appears,
His dreadful name declares: See them fly through the sky,
And join the silent sound from the ground.

⁶⁸ Ellen T. H. Harvey, *Wilderness and Mount; A Poem of Tabernacles* (Boston: John Bent, 1872), 19.

⁶⁹ This interest in insect choirs persists in contemporary evangelical culture. In her study of the modern Vineyard movement, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American*

Nature's Place in Evangelical Morphologies of Spiritual Progress

I. Mountains and Caves: Mapping Morphology onto the Landscape

Believers employed whatever topographical variety they could find in their local landscape in their efforts at spiritual progress. Given the number of scriptural narratives that locate divine encounters in elevated locations, it is no surprise that “mountain-top experiences” frequently took place on or near actual mountains. The Methodist itinerant Christian Newcomer harnessed the weeks he spent in travel crisscrossing the Appalachians as periods of spiritual retreat and advancement, times of self-knowledge and divine knowledge that facilitated a series of powerful transformative encounters. In November 1798, while on the road to Akwick, he wrote of being “astounded” at the mountainous country. Wonder awoke feelings of finitude in the face of divine unknowability: “What a wonderful fabric is this globe which we inhabit? who can fathom the nature thereof, or of him who created the same?” On another occasion, his mind was “lost in wonder and admiration of the Omnipotent Creator, whose power was sufficient

Evangelical Relationship with God (New York: Knopf, 2012), anthropologist T. H. Luhrmann describes an encounter with a subject who recalls being told that, when the song of a cricket is slowed down in a recording, it reveals itself to be Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus. In some ways, this is a contemporary variant of the trope I am describing here—the sense that creation (humanity excepted) is automatically attuned to the divine and engaged in a state of constant praise. In her study, Luhrmann focuses on those for whom the real presence of God is something that must be cultivated, discerned, and built up over time through spiritual exercises (rather than through a single, dramatic conversion experience); it is, she concludes, “more like learning to do something than to think something” (xxi). Luhrmann takes this as evidence of a complex theory of mind, which entails interpretation and training, like spiritual exercise, and argues that this is a recent innovation of evangelical practice. Such developments, in fact, have a much longer history.

to create these enormous mountains, raised apparently on the top of one another in enormous grandeur.”⁷⁰

But the new life was no simple ascent to ever-higher joys. Pilgrimage played off the rise and fall of the landscape itself. In the mountains and foothills of the Appalachians, topography became a measure of the daily struggles of the spirit. In March 1796, Benjamin Lakin wrote of having suffered for some time “under various exercise of mind” pertaining to the Wesleyan doctrine of perfection. He resolved to make the next day’s ride over a Kentucky range a time of retreat, in which he would give himself over to “fasting and prayer to the Lord.” At the end of his long journey, he lay prostrate on the ground in prayer and received three visions of Christ, the first “Sweating blood and agonising for me,” the second nailed to the cross, the last “dicing then risen and in heaven pleading for me.” Filled with love, Lakin asked Christ to nail his affection to the cross.⁷¹

Having resolved his struggle with perfection, a month later Lakin’s circuit crossed another set of mountains. This time, he found his travel easy, a reflection of his new confidence in the doctrine of perfection, gained through previous ordeal. “In crossing a large Mountain,” he wrote, “my soul was much resigned to the will of God. When I came to the top of the Mountain, I cal[le]d on the Lord to direct my way and make it prosperous [sic]. I found some faith that the Lord would own my labors.”⁷² For Lakin, natural landscapes offered laboratories in experimental piety. Ascetic exertion and self-

⁷⁰ Newcomer, *Life and Journal of Christian Newcomer*, 44. Similarly, on February 29, 1808, Newcomer wrote, “I rode all day alone, across the South mountain; though solitary in this wilderness, I felt myself happy in the presence of the Lord.” Newcomer, *Life and Journal of Christian Newcomer*, 163.

⁷¹ “The Journal of Benjamin Lakin,” in William Warren Sweet, ed., *Religion on the American Frontier, Vol. 4, The Methodists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 215.

⁷² Sweet, *Journal of Benjamin Lakin*, 211.

denial yielded to a sense of sweetness and intimacy with Christ triggered by the movement through, and struggle to overcome, a literal wilderness.

If scripture declared that mountains were auspicious sites for cultivating the presence of God, so too were caves. In folk traditions, the area beneath the surface of the earth had long been associated with the underworld, the domain of Satan and his minions.⁷³ By the late eighteenth century, however, those associations were beginning to change, just as they were in the case of mountains. In June 1781, Asbury described being “filled with wonder, with humble praise, and adoration” after a visit to a group of caverns in Virginia (present-day West Virginia). The interior chamber, supported by basalt pillars, recalled a European cathedral. When his guide struck a crop of stalactites thrusting out like the pipes of a great organ, Asbury reported that they emitted a “melodious sound.” Asbury was so moved that he sang one of his favorite hymns, “Still Out of the Deepest Abyss,” by Charles Wesley. The second verse described the goal of sanctification in terms of restoring the image of Christ in the soul: “Thy nature I long to put on, Thine image on earth to regain.”⁷⁴ Asbury’s descent into a literal abyss provoked contemplation of the soul’s spiritual abyss, whose depths signaled absence while inviting the all-filling presence of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁵

⁷³ On the place of evangelical religion in the daily lives of early twentieth-century coal miners in Kentucky, see Richard J. Callahan Jr., *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields: Subject to Dust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

⁷⁴ *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1836), 475. The Wesley brothers repeatedly described God as a “bottomless abyss,” as the one “Whose Throne is darkness in the’ abyss / Of uncreated light.

⁷⁵ Christian Newcomer and Benjamin Lakin were similarly moved to wonder by the sight of caves and abysses on their journeys. After a trip of forty-six miles through the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee in October 1800, Newcomer described his view from a “narrow winding path” of “an almost unfathomable abyss, at the bottom of which, though unseen,

II. Groves: Suffering Nature and the Imitation of Christ

It didn't take a natural wonder to awaken Asbury's sense of divine presence in the creation. For him, as for other early Methodists, all of nature was a church. Indeed, it is rare for his journals to run more than a few pages without a report of "sweet communion with God in the woods."⁷⁶ Evangelicals found encouragement to retreat into groves to pray from a number of sources, including hymns. "Night Thought," a hymn included in Ingalls's *Christian Harmony*, opens with the believer tossing and turning in bed. "How can I sleep," she asks, when "celestial spirits praise the Lord with all their might"? Believers were admonished to fight sleep, a metaphor for spiritual listlessness.

In the next verse, preparation yields to prayer, humiliation to praise. After meditating on the atonement, a gift unworthy of "guilty worms" such as her, the singer arises from her bed and goes into nature. Like Sarah Jones, the hymnist appealed to Christ's night of struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, a struggle in which Christ surrendered himself entirely to the will of the father.

My lovely Jesus, while on earth
Did rise before 'twas day,
And to a solitary place
He went and there did pray.

I could hear the gurgling of a small stream of water." Newcomer noted his own insignificance in contrast with God's greatness as creator. Newcomer, *Life and Journal of Christian Newcomer*, 76. In his journal entry for Wednesday, Nov. 23, 1795, Lakin described an experience in Sinking Creek, Virginia: "in the evening had a view of the wonderfull works of God, in creation, I had the opportunity of viewing of a cave. It went about 200 yards underground. Overhead it is one solid rock out of which there is a continual dropping of water that turns into stone again." Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, Vol. 4, 213.

⁷⁶ Asbury, *Journal of Francis Asbury* 1, 515. For other examples, see pages 193, 194, 385, 325, 429, 460.

As the hymn suggests, evangelicals most often chose the hours before dawn and after sunset (especially midnight) for their devotion. In the grove, freed from the temptations of the world, the singer engaged in the uninterrupted love of God, which led in time to a vision of the Christ's face, a movement that Baxter described as "implantation."

I'll do as did my blessed Lord,
His foot-steps I will trace;
I long to meet him in the grove,
And view his smiling face.⁷⁷

Having shaken off spiritual drowsiness and surrendered to the divine will, the believer hoped to enjoy the divine presence.

If meditations all divine,
At midnight fill my soul;
Sleep shall no longer all my powers
And faculties control.⁷⁸

Through prolonged struggle, the believer worked to be worthy to receive the gift of perfection or sanctification, a state in which the lethargic drag of original sin (the urge to slide from wakefulness to "sleep") was removed, raising and restoring the powers and faculties to their original state of purity and attention. For Methodists, especially, the witness of "perfect love" would be granted to some during this life and to others only at the moment of death. Regardless, it was a demand of all engaged in Christian pilgrimage, since "without holiness, no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).⁷⁹ The path of holiness lay in the extinction of the will perceived as a reality independent of God, a daily, disciplined subtraction of the self. In order to lose oneself in God, one lost oneself in the creation. In numerous letters and journal entries, evangelicals describe experience of

⁷⁷ Ingalls, *Christian Harmony*, 165.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷⁹ Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Hannah Syng Bunting*, 140.

incorporation into the natural world, both pleasant and painful, that either anticipated or accompanied experiences of union with Christ such as we have seen already with Thomas Coke's practice of "ingulphing" himself in the woods to be rid of all but "the quiet vegetable creation, and MY GOD." Union with the creation taught fallen humanity how to pray and healed a sign of the ancient curse, the division introduced between Adam and the rest of creation by original sin.

This pursuit of union with nature often entailed physical suffering. Thomas Coke was no transparent eyeball, no lord of all he surveyed. Coke suffered the "innumerable" ticks lurking in the American woods. "They burrow in the flesh, and raise pimples," he wrote, "which sometimes are quite alarming, and look like the effects of a very disagreeable disorder." However painful, these sufferings were inconsequential, he wrote, "opposed to my affection for my Lord." There follows a verse copied from "Meditation in a Grove," a poem included in Isaac Watts's *Horae Lyricae*. The English Puritan's hymns and sacramental poetry found a more receptive audience in the new republic than in the "British Israel for whom he had first poured out his efforts," writes Esther Rothenbusch Crookshank, who describes Watts as the "liturgist for a new nation."⁸⁰ Central to Watts's popularity was his translation of the Psalms. Crookshank has argued that Watts

made hymnody a microcosm of the world, and peopled it with fish, mountains, rainbows, all manner of creeping things, snatching them all from the Psalms but animating them with rhyme and tune—animation...in the sense of the Holy Spirit's *ruach* (or breath), by Whom life constantly, joyously springs forth. Watts brought...the whole world into divine praise because that is where he believed they belonged—under

⁸⁰ Esther Rothenbusch Crookshank, "We're Marching to Zion?: Isaac Watts in Early America," in Richard J. Mouw and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Wonderful Words of Life: Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 39. According to Stephen Marini, Watts was the most published poet in eighteenth-century America. See Stephen A. Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 76.

God's sway and Christ's glorious reign.⁸¹

The vision of all creatures united in constant praise seemed cut to fit the spiritual tenor of American revivalism, a movement forged in close association with nature.

Coke either committed the verse to heart or carried Watts's *Horae Lyricae* in his saddlebags, alongside his copy of Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*. In either case, the verse suggests the ease with which evangelical devotion to Christ could be readily advanced through mystical communion with the natural world. It also expressed a difference from earlier traditions of Christian mystical practice. In contrast to monastic traditions of contemplation, which drew material for their meditation on natural images in the Psalter, evangelical mystics, inheritors of an Enlightenment emphasis on direct observation and a Pietist emphasis on experimental piety, took a flesh-and-blood creation as the substance of their contemplations.

I'll carve thy passion on the bark:
And every wounded Tree
Shall drop, and bear some mystic mark
That Jesus died for me.
The Swains shall wonder, when they read
Inscrib'd on all the Grove,
That Heaven itself came down and bled
To win a mortal's Love.⁸²

The poet has retired to a grove to write verses in praise of love. Having called on a muse to “descend and bless the shade,” he then banishes the “wanton young and fair” woodland goddesses of classical works such as Virgil's *Eclogues*. “Mine,” he writes, “is a purer flame.” Jesus, who has “all my powers possess,” will serve the poet as both muse

⁸¹ Crookshank, “We’re Marching to Zion,” 39.

⁸² Isaac Watts, *Horae Lyricae and Divine Songs* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1854), 107–108. Coke made one error in his transcription of the first line: Coke writes, “I’ll carve our passion,” while Watts in the original version writes “thy passion.”

and object of desire: “His charms,” Watts writes, “shall make my numbers flow,” while all creation stops its courses and turns an ear to his song to Christ’s suffering love. The evening rain hangs fire behind the curtain of the heavens, while “silence sits on ev’ry bough / And bends the list’ning woods.” In a final twist, Watts announces that he will not commit his narrative poem or “passion” to paper or parchment. Instead, he will engrave it directly on the bark of the attentive trees, his first audience. The trees, heartstruck with love and physically wounded by the violence of Watts’s strokes, drop to the ground in a swoon of erotic surrender.⁸³

The “mystic mark” carved on the bark holds a double meaning. On the one hand, it evokes the stigmata of Francis, the wounds that conform the ascetic’s body to Christ’s. On the other, it gestures to the divine signature, the *vestigia dei* or spiritual traces of the creator left behind in the creation. Watts concludes the poem by addressing his future audience. Young shepherds or “swains,” who might happen to pass through the grove with their flocks, will stumble on his graffiti “inscrib’d” on the bark, their surprise yielding to “wonder” at God’s relentless romance for humanity, that “Heaven itself came down and bled / To win a mortal’s Love.”

Coke’s decision to copy Watts’s verse directly beneath his own meditations on suffering and desire in the quiet, vegetable creation offers significant clues to his sense of how contemplation of the natural world offers a path to mystical union with Christ. The marks left by the “innumerable” ticks on Coke’s skin echoed the mystic marks inscribed on the bark of the grove. In each, the parallel to stigmata is unavoidable. Like Watts’s hymn, Coke’s journal entry was offered in imitation of the gospel. Just as Coke strove to imitate Christ’s passion through his ordeal with the ticks, the narrative of his personal

⁸³ Watts, *Horae Lyricae*, 107–108.

journal recapitulated the cosmic narrative of divine suffering love, offered back to Christ. This was not natural theology, conceived as a rational demonstration of the existence and qualities of an abstract, benevolent deity. It was, rather, an evangelical mysticism of nature, a set of private practices and beliefs intended to help those already converted to grab hold of the promises of new life in Christ.

Methodists, Calvinists, and Women’s Special Receptivity to the “Religion of Nature”

Psalm 8:3, addressed to God, prodded believers to “consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained.”⁸⁴ Nearly any natural environment suited the Methodist Hannah Synge Bunting’s “holy contemplation” of God’s works, but none more so than the night sky. One evening in December 1825, having finished her “delightful employment” in “contemplation and communion with God,” she wrote to her cousin. “My feelings were past describing. The moon shone through my chamber window, and caused a pleasing sadness. I know but little of rapture, but while engaged in holy contemplation, I am often lost to all below the skies.”⁸⁵

Perhaps it was modesty speaking. Experiential transport into the life of God was

⁸⁴ Jane Taylor, the English evangelical poet responsible (along with her sister, Ann) for two of the most popular collections of nineteenth-century children’s books, captured one of the most famous cases of star-struck contemplation in her poem, “The Star” (also known as “Twinkle, twinkle little star”). Jane and Ann Taylor, *Rhymes for the Nursery* (Philadelphia: George S. Appleton, 1849), 30.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 89. On the devotional function of natural theology and its place in the art of the English painter, John Russell, and evangelical who had a special devotion to the moon, see Antje Matthews, “John Russell (1745–1806) and the Impact of Evangelicalism and Natural Theology on Artistic Practice,” Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2005.

practically all Bunting sought from earthly life.⁸⁶ Conventional wisdom suggests that the post-conversion experiences of Calvinists rarely soared to the heights of Methodists, owing to their view of original sin as intractable, even after salvation. While Methodists climbed to the higher boughs of “entire holiness,” those of a Reformed bent contented themselves with lower-hanging fruit. But Calvinism was no flightless bird. The private writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe demonstrate an affinity with what Richard Baxter described as “the soul ravishing exercises of heavenly Contemplation.”⁸⁷ The noted novelist and abolitionist first encountered Baxter’s *Saints’ Everlasting Rest* as a teenager attending school in Hartford, Connecticut. According to her family, Stowe “often said that no book ever affected her so powerfully. As she walked the pavements she wished that they might sink beneath her, and she awake in heaven.”⁸⁸ Later in life, Baxter’s influence continued to be felt on Stowe, including an 1834 visit to Niagara Falls.⁸⁹ In a letter, she described an experience of transport that yielded intimate, firsthand insight

⁸⁶ Mary Cooper offers a transatlantic comparison to Bunting. An English Methodist who lived most of her life in Hammersmith and, like Bunting, died young (Cooper at twenty-six, Bunting at thirty-one), Cooper similarly extolled the need to give oneself over to rapture in the contemplation of nature. In a letter to her brother, she described the religious experiences produced by her regular practice of “sweet solitary walks.” “I hope you are an admirer of the works of nature,” she wrote, “and do not despise occasional enthusiastic raptures in the contemplation of His works, in the least of which the Deity is so conspicuous.” During an earlier trip, meditation on the rugged beauty of cliffs and caverns produced “almost an ecstasy. In such scenes,” she wrote, “I am an enthusiast, and hardly know what other circumstances could produce equal rapture.” Clark, *Memoirs of Mary Cooper*, 66.

⁸⁷ Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 164.

⁸⁸ Charles Edward Stowe and Lyman Beecher Stowe, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Story of Her Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 42.

⁸⁹ On Niagara Falls and changing views in aesthetics, see Elizabeth R. McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). See also Patrick McGreevy, *Imagining Niagara: The Meaning and Making of Niagara Falls* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

into the divine nature, a sense that shifted from nature to supernature, from power to beauty, from fear to love.

Let me tell you, if I can, what is unutterable. I did not once think whether it was high or low; whether it roared or didn't roar; whether it equaled my expectations or not. My mind whirled off, it seemed to me, in a new, strange world. It seemed unearthly, like the strange, dim images in the Revelation. I thought of the great white throne; the rainbow around it; the throne in sight like unto an emerald; and oh! that beautiful water rising like moonlight, falling as the soul sinks when it dies, to rise refined, spiritualized, and pure; that rainbow, breaking out, trembling, fading, and again coming like a beautiful spirit walking the waters. Oh, it is lovelier than it is great; it is like the Mind that made it: great, but so veiled in beauty that we gaze without terror. I felt as if I could have *gone over* with the waters; it would be so beautiful a death; there would be no fear in it. I felt the rock tremble under me with a sort of joy. I was so maddened that I could have gone too, if it had gone.⁹⁰

As a model of evangelical mysticism, the letter is hard to beat. Stowe peered through the veil of the visible to the invisible, from present to future, ascending to a vision of the Great White Throne. The mystical vision was “unutterable.” The movement of water from waterfall and rising again in mist recalled for her the journey of the soul from fall to recovery. Even inanimate rock trembled in praise at the vision of the divine beauty. She entered an altered emotional state, “maddened.” The annihilation to which she felt

⁹⁰ Annie Fields, ed. *The Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1897), 89–90. Edward Hitchcock offers another instance of evangelical contemplation of natural phenomenon as a form of prophetic vision. In a meditation upon the rainbow, Hitchcock wrote that the Book of Revelation “teaches us that we need not fear forming too vivid conceptions of these glories that will burst upon the vision of the righteous when they tread the new earth, and the canopy of the heavens is arched over them. As we look then upon the literal rainbow and admire its beauties, let us apply to it the conception of the seer of Patmos, and change it into an emerald arch in the heavens. Then let imagination, with that rainbow in her hand, mount up to the New Jerusalem, and with it encircle the throne of God.” Hitchcock went on to describe a walk he took in Amherst following an ice storm, the “sea of glass” producing feelings of amazement, admiration, and deep delight. “In short,” he wrote, it seemed as if I was gazing upon a landscape which had before existed only in a poet’s imagination. It is what he would call a fairy land: but a more Christian designation would be, a celestial land.” Edward Hitchcock, *Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomenon in the Four Seasons* (Amherst: J. S. & C. Adams, 1850), 80, 113–116.

properly called would be a beautiful death, she wrote, without fear.

Stowe knew something about beautiful deaths. Her literary career was made by one. The slow passing of “little Eva” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* remains perhaps the most famous death in American letters. Eva and Tom sit together in a garden arbor looking out on Lake Pontchartrain:

It was Sunday evening, and Eva’s Bible lay open on her knee. She read,—“And I saw a sea of glass, mingled with fire.”

“Tom,” said Eva, suddenly stopping, and pointing to the lake, “there ’t is.”

“What, Miss Eva?”

“Don’t you see,—there?” said the child, pointing to the glassy water, which, as it rose and fell, reflected the golden glow of the sky. “There’s a ‘sea of glass, mingled with fire.’”

“True enough, Miss Eva,” said Tom.⁹¹

The scene shares much with Stowe’s earlier depiction of her experience at Niagara Falls. In each case, contemplation of a body of water (Niagara Falls, Lake Pontchartrain) results in a vision of an eschatological event described in the Book of Revelation (the Great White Throne Judgment, the future destruction of the earth).⁹² In each account, the interpretive capacity described is simultaneously elitist (the spiritual senses belong only to

⁹¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 268.

⁹² Edward Hitchcock offers another instance of evangelical contemplation of natural phenomenon as a form of prophetic vision. In a meditation upon the rainbow, Hitchcock wrote that the Book of Revelation “teaches us that we need not fear forming too vivid conceptions of these glories that will burst upon the vision of the righteous when they tread the new earth, and the canopy of the heavens is arched over them. As we look then upon the literal rainbow and admire its beauties, let us apply to it the conception of the seer of Patmos, and change it into an emerald arch in the heavens. Then let imagination, with that rainbow in her hand, mount up to the New Jerusalem, and with it encircle the throne of God.” Hitchcock went on to describe a walk he took in Amherst following an ice storm, the “sea of glass” producing feelings of amazement, admiration, and deep delight. “In short,” he wrote, it seemed as if I was gazing upon a landscape which had before existed only in a poet’s imagination. It is what he would call a fairy land: but a more Christian designation would be, a celestial land.” Edward Hitchcock, *Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomenon in the Four Seasons* (Amherst: J. S. & C. Adams, 1850), 80, 113–116.

those who have experienced the new birth) and democratic (among the justified, it pertains equally to women, and in the case of the second account, to children and slaves as well). All believers, she suggested, were enjoined to become like John of Patmos. Growing up in early nineteenth-century New England, Stowe may well have been familiar with J. F. Martinet's *Catechism of Nature*, which taught early American schoolchildren that the contemplation of nature was a pleasure and duty open to all people, regardless of social background or intellectual training:

Pupil. What may I expect from the contemplation of the works of nature?

Tutor. Both profit and pleasure. As God has formed the eye to behold the beauties of nature, it must be both agreeable and useful.

Pupil. Is not this a pleasure confined to the learned?

Tutor. By no means; the peasant, as well as the philosopher, may partake of this pleasure. A moderate share of knowledge is sufficient. The creation is open to the view of all; it only requires observation.⁹³

Women were excluded from nearly all Protestant pulpits in the nineteenth century and with it the public exegesis of scripture. Yet they were often encouraged, at least rhetorically, to take the lead in interpreting the lively signs in God's second book. Stowe's brother, Henry Ward Beecher, himself duly authorized as a scriptural interpreter, seemed to support such a rough equality. In his novel, *Norwood* (1867), he expressed a general sentiment of the Victorian age, that women were more receptive than men to the "religion of nature." Women are, he wrote, "in childlike sympathy with the truths of God in the natural world, instead of books."⁹⁴ Of course, the crux lay in the last three words. Like children, women were considered deficient in reason and therefore less equipped

⁹³ Martinet, *Catechism of Nature*, 4.

⁹⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, *Norwood; or, Village Life in New England* (New York: Charles Scribner & Company, 1868). On Beecher's view of nature, see William G. McLoughlin, *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher: An Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America, 1840–1870* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

than men to engage in formal exegesis of scripture. At the same time, evangelicals (even the well educated) frequently denigrated “mere” head knowledge and bookishness as arid formalism. Vital faith was expressed in experiential knowledge rather than in abstract formulas and creeds. There was nothing particularly new in this ambivalence regarding women’s purportedly special receptivity to direct religious experience. For antebellum women engaged in the contemplation of nature, the consequence was an increased vulnerability to accusations of enthusiasm and quietism.

The Dangers of Evangelical Mysticism: Pantheism and Quietism

Evangelicals who frequently retired into nature for purposes of prayer and contemplation had a number of stigmas to overcome. First, the contemplation of nature could not appear “enthusiastic,” airing pretensions to private revelations; rhetorical postures of humility and self-denial tempered claims to spiritual attainment. Additionally, the revelation gleaned from the book of nature could not openly contradict conventional interpretations of scripture. In deploying nature as a key to unlock what Stowe called the “strange, dim images in the Revelation,” one had to be vigilant not to reverse the standard order or hierarchy of books.⁹⁵ Taken far enough, such an impulse could easily lead to a sense of the sufficiency of nature unto itself as a source of divine knowledge.

⁹⁵ John Newton stated the orthodox position that scripture alone could unlock the true meaning of the natural world, not the other way around. “The works of creation,” he wrote, “may be compared to a fair character in cipher, of which the Bible is the key; without this key they cannot be understood.” Independent of the study of scripture, the study of nature, “though dignified with the name of *philosophy*” was “no better than an elaborate trifling and waste of time.” David Bebbington, “Science and Evangelical Theology in Britain from Wesley to Orr,” in David N. Livingstone, D. G. Hart, and Mark Noll, eds., *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 121.

Evangelicals did not shy away from employing the language of rapture and annihilation to describe experiences of union with Christ. Many eagerly quoted Charles Wesley's hymn, "Saviour of the sin-sick soul," as the sum of the spiritual life:

O that I might now decrease!
O that all I am might cease!
Let me into nothing fall!
Let my Lord be all in all!⁹⁶

However, no evangelical in good standing would have insisted that annihilation and union negated the permanent distinction between creator and creature. Naturalistic images communicated theological subtleties. For Baptists, water provided a salient metaphor to parse heresy from orthodoxy. One Baptist hymn included in Joshua Smith's *Divine Hymns, or Spiritual Songs* (1803) walked the line as close as possible, describing the soul as a drop of water absorbed into a "vast sea," an ancient trope for divine union that went to back to the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux.⁹⁷

Then let my soul absorbed be,
While God doth me surround,
As a small drop in the vast sea
Is lost and can't be found.⁹⁸

The soul, absorbed into God, is also surrounded by God, suggesting the survival of boundaries, however porous and subtle.

⁹⁶ John Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, Vol. 5 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1869), 306. The Methodist Adam Wallace, for instance, italicized the third line to leave no room for mistake. See Adam Wallace, *The Parson of the Islands: A Biography of the Late Rev. Joshua Thomas* (Philadelphia: Office of the Methodist Home Journal, 1870, c. 1861), 94.

⁹⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diligendo deo*, in J. Leclercq, et al, eds. *Sancti Bernardi opera*, 6 vols (Paris: Editiones Cisterciennes, 1957-77), vol. III, 10.28.

⁹⁸ Joshua Smith and Samuel Sleeper, *Divine Hymns, or Spiritual Songs* (Portland: Thomas Clark, 1803), 16.

Women's special sympathy with the natural world opened them in a special way to accusations of enthusiasm. T. Merritt, who compiled and edited the journals of Hannah Syng Bunting, presented her as an exemplar in the contemplation of nature, defending her "admiration" of God's works against charges of enthusiasm. That "elevated piety," he wrote,

which ever delights in contemplating the perfections of the universal Architect in his works, prepared her for the highest enjoyment in all the variety which the heavens and the earth, day and night, present to the eye. While the ignorant and the superstitious pass by all these things as unworthy (as though admiration here were the same as idolatry,) with her they were incentives to devotion, and sources of the purest enjoyment. She truly "looked through nature up to nature's God."⁹⁹

Yet even he may have felt some trepidation. In one passage, the young Sunday School teacher quoted from *The Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers*, an anonymous twelfth-century work previously attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, while contemplating her "nothingness" in relation to God, the being whose "centre is everywhere, and whose circumference nowhere."¹⁰⁰ Merritt may have also flinched when Bunting praised Francois Fénelon, the archbishop of Cambrai and defender of Madame Guyon, for having helped her gain a proper grasp of the meaning of "continual prayer."¹⁰¹ To preach a theology of self-extinction, a slow strangling of the will so that God might be all in all, invited charges of enthusiasm. Perhaps anticipating such objections, Bunting

⁹⁹ Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Hannah Syng Bunting*, 18–19.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 71. On the major themes and background of *The Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers*, see Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany, 1300–1500* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2005), 42–4.

¹⁰¹ Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Hannah Syng Bunting*, 101. On the reception of Fénelon by American Protestants, see Patricia A. Ward, *Experimental Theology in America: Madame Guyon, Fénelon, and Their Readers* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009). See also Leigh E. Schmidt's review of Ward's book in *Spiritus* 10.1 (Spring 2010), 109–111.

invoking the promise of the new life in Christ by paraphrasing Paul's Epistle to the Colossians. "Let us ever dare to be singular," she wrote, "and live a life hid with Christ in God."¹⁰² Lifted into the secret life of the Trinity, the spiritually advanced sought identification with the source of life itself. Such identification, however, must not dissolve the bounds of self and other but rather reconstitute them in a new formulation.

Second, nature mysticism could not become antisocial or quietist. Puritan writers had often striven to balance the solitude necessary for a rich interior life with the call to spread the gospel and reform society. Richard Baxter offered the following counsel: "Though I would not persuade thee to Pythagoras his Cave, nor to the Hermits Wilderness, nor to the Monks Cell; yet I would advise thee to frequent solitariness, that thou mayest confer with Christ and with thy self, as well as with others."¹⁰³ How precisely to practice "frequent solitariness" without appearing monkish became largely a subjective determination. Wherever possible, believers sought an accommodation between the love of neighbor and the love of God. In his introduction to Hannah Syng Bunting's published journals, T. Merritt declared his heroine's "elevated piety" free from the "tinct of the cloister." While Bunting "held the sweetest and most transporting communion with God," Merritt wrote, "she delighted in the society of her relations and religious friends, and was ever ready to take the 'walks of usefulness' among them. She was by nature social."¹⁰⁴ John Wesley would have approved.

¹⁰² Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Hannah Syng Bunting*, 89. The reference is to Colossians 3:3: "For ye are dead, and your life is hid in Christ with God."

¹⁰³ Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 163.

¹⁰⁴ Merritt, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Hannah Syng Bunting*, 18. Mary Cooper again affords a transatlantic comparison. While Cooper wrote that she found her "blessed seasons" of retirement "more sweet, more animating, than could be produced by all the artificial

Protestant visual culture of the period reinforced the message that periodic retreat into nature need not come at the expense of evangelism, sociability, or corporate worship. For evangelicals, private contemplative and devotional practices were not considered sufficient replacements for public worship. In “Secret Prayer” (see image at end of paper), a lithographic print included in *Sacred Annual*, published in Philadelphia in 1851, a young woman in a flowing white dress kneels in prayer outdoors in a rocky field, surrounded by vegetation and overlooked by a distant full moon. A floral wreath lies near her on the ground. To the left in the distance, a church steeple appears.¹⁰⁵ The woman has not forsaken congregational worship; she has not turned to worship nature above nature’s God. Rather, she is worshipping alongside and *with* nature. As evangelical journals, diaries, and letters attest, retreat into nature functioned as a space of preparation for and complement to corporate, public worship. Retirement into nature for the love of God worked a fruitful dialectic with public worship, as it did with the active duties of Christian life: visiting the sick, evangelism, and other forms of service.¹⁰⁶

means the world offers,” she also feared too much of a good thing. After two months of restorative walks on the English coast, she confessed that she hungered for “full occupation and means of being actively useful.” Over the next two evenings, she visited the local public bathing rooms to engage “two very sensible women” in serious conversation on matters of religion. Despite best efforts, she failed to win either soul. Clark, *Memoirs of Mary Cooper*, 74, 64–5.

¹⁰⁵ “Secret Prayer,” in H. Hastings Weld, ed., *Sacred Annual* (Philadelphia: T. K. Collins Jr., 1851), plate facing p. 54. For similar examples of lithographic prints in evangelical publications depicting women worshipping in nature, see *The Remember Me* (Philadelphia: H. F. Anners, 1845), frontispiece; John C. McCrae, “The Morning Prayer,” in Arthur, *Temperance Offering, for 1853*, plate facing p. 225. Lithographs of scenes from the Hebrew Bible such as the song of Miriam reinforced the connection between biblical landscapes and contemporary American nature.

¹⁰⁶ Edward Howells has argued that the historiography of the Protestant Reformation showcases the dangers of presenting “an irreconcilable opposition between all forms of exterior social or ecclesial life and the interior life with God.” As an example, he cites

To whatever degree evangelicals continued practices of contemplation rooted in the devotional habits of late medieval Europe, talk of mystics and mysticism still carried dangerous freight. Thomas Coke's journals point up the ambivalent status of the hermit in Methodist circles. He sounded a note of apology when admitting to his "almost excessive love of retirement." While he once admitted to being tempting to remain forever on the wooded peaks of Antigua, "where I would make circular walks, and spend my time in communion with God, and in the study of Astronomy and Botany," like the disciples on Mount Tabor, he soon returned to his public duties, an itinerant in the apostolic mode.¹⁰⁷ Ecstatic, intimate union with the godhead was good and desirable so long as it did not become an impediment in the spread of the gospel. Too much time on the mountaintop could lead one to forget those stuck in spiritual crevasses and fumbling in the foothills.¹⁰⁸

Steven Ozment's argument in *Mysticism and Dissent* that mysticism is a "challenge, always in theory if not in daily practice, to the regular, normative way of religious salvation'....because it is concerned with 'more intimate communications from God than those which the eyes and ears behold in the sermons, sacraments, ceremonies and writings of the church.'" A more fruitful approach, Howells suggests, would be to consider the "creative dynamic between the inner sources of mysticism, on the one hand, and its exterior life as an aspect of reform, on the other, noting the tensions and the new ways in which the inner and outer were put together, producing new forms of reformation mysticism." Edward Howells, "Early Modern Reformations," in Amy Hollywood and Patricia C. Beckman, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 119–121. Bernard McGinn similarly dismisses the notion of inevitable conflict between the "mystical element" and institutional religion, "if only," he writes, "because so many key mystics in the history of Christianity have also been profound theologians and pillars of the institution—think only of Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Bonaventure." Rather, he concludes, we do better to think of "complex and dynamic interaction." McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 49–50.

¹⁰⁷ Coke, *Journals*, 146.

¹⁰⁸ John Wesley Childs furnishes another instance of evangelical anxiety over retirement. In a funeral sermon for the nineteenth-century Methodist itinerant, G. W. Langhorne

From Presence to Absence: The Wilderness State

However transportive, the sweetness of rapture or union could only temporarily lift the soul above the struggles of daily life. Soon enough, the believer returned to the wilderness. After one particularly sweet episode of moonlit contemplation, Bunting sighed, “But I have still to fight my passage through this land, where snares surround me.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, itinerants such as Christian Newcomer and Benjamin Lakin knew that spiritual life could not be lived entirely in the heights. God’s presence was strong but fleeting, and struggles soon returned. “O! how many steep and rugged hills has the christian to ascend?” wrote Lakin after descending one eastern mountain range. “How many obstacles and difficulties to overcome?”¹¹⁰ As much as believers may have longed for their own speedy annihilation, sudden loss could break nature’s spell. Thomas Coke noted in his journal how news of John Wesley’s passing had clouded his ability to take pleasure in “the contemplation of the works of nature.”¹¹¹ Unlike the singer in “Night Thought,” who delighted to see Christ’s face in the grove at midnight, “The Tedious

defended Childs’s “private habits.” “The closet or the silent grove were sacred retreats to him,” wrote Langhorne, such that his “love of seclusion called him away from that social intercourse with his people which is generally expected and desired.” As a result, “he was thought by many to be too much of an ascetic.” Langhorne found an excuse the late minister’s “apparently unsociable manner of life” in his single-minded devotion to “entire consecration to God.” John Ellis Edwards, *Life of John Wesley Childs: For Twenty-three Years an Itinerant Methodist Minister* (Richmond and Louisville: John Early, 1852), 284.

¹⁰⁹ Coke, *Journals*, 89.

¹¹⁰ Newcomer, *Life and Journal of Christian Newcomer*, 43. For other instances of mountaintop worship from Newcomer’s journal, see pp. 76, 163, 309.

¹¹¹ Coke, *Journals*, 178.

Hour,” another hymn in Jeremiah Ingalls’ *Christian Harmony*, acknowledged how difficult, even impossible, it was to sustain the felt presence of Christ in daily life.

How tedious & tasteless the hours,
When Jesus no longer I see,
Sweet prospect, sweet birds & sweet flowers,
Have lost all their sweetness to me.

The mid summer sun shines but dim,
The fields strive in vain to look gay;
But when I am happy in him,
December is pleasant as May.¹¹²

When spiritual ardor declined, the spiritual sense dimmed. Spiritualizing landscapes and creatures depended not only on faithfulness to public duties of evangelism and service but on regular attention to the private duties of prayer and contemplation. “As far as my poor experience goes,” wrote John Wesley Childs in a letter counseling a friend, “I find that *public duties* will not supply the place of *private*. May the Lord help us to imitate the example of the great Master.” Childs proceeded to quote one of John Wesley’s favorite mystics, the seventeenth-century French Marquis de Renty: “the less we visit our closets, the less we relish; the more frequently, the greater the sweetness there.”¹¹³ In retirement, longing began the search for the beloved anew.

¹¹² Ingalls, *Christian Harmony*, 14.

¹¹³ Edwards, *Life of John Wesley Childs*, 215. John Wesley published *An Extract of the Life of Monsieur de Renty* in 1741. On Wesley’s interest in the Marquis de Renty as a model of the practical effects of the mystical life, see D. Dunn Wilson, “John Wesley, Gregory Lopez and the Marquis de Renty,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 35 (December 1966), 181–4.

Chapter 3

Healing Springs: Nature-Cure, Practical Vitalism, and the Therapeutic Landscape

On August 22, 1850, the lead story in *The Religious Herald*, a Baptist newspaper published in Richmond, Virginia, described what its author, Thornton Stringfellow, called a “most glorious manifestation” of the goodness of God in providing for the “moral maladies” afflicting humanity. Stringfellow, an influential Baptist minister, social reformer, and slaveholder, wasn’t praising the fruits of a local revival. The previous summer, he wrote, “I was led to try the virtue of remedies prepared immediately by the hand of God—I mean our mineral waters.” Virginia’s healing waters, he wrote, “gush forth from the laboratory of God” in three mountain ranges: the Alleghany, the Blue Ridge, and the piedmonts of Fauquier County. Though all were similar in appearance to the untrained observer, the waters were far from uniform in their effects. Experience demonstrated that each spring had been calibrated to cure a specific disease or set of diseases. Like other antebellum enthusiasts for mineral springs, Stringfellow was convinced that the curative power of water was virtually limitless, a miracle of nature. “Actual experience shows,” he wrote, that medical properties had been “infused, by the Almighty hand” into Virginia’s springs in such a way as to make them “equal to the cure of, perhaps, every form of chronic suffering known among us.”¹

Naturally occurring mineral springs had been harnessed for their health and healing properties dating back to the ancient world. The fourteenth and fifteenth

¹ William Stringfellow, “Mineral Springs of Virginia.” *The Religious Herald*, August 22, 1850, 1.

centuries saw a reawakening of interest in classical practices of bathing and the recovery of ancient texts detailing hydrotherapy regimen. This interest spread from Europe, especially Italy, to Britain and became a marker of social fashion. Due in part to the promotional efforts of William Turner, a Protestant divine and botanist, spas became part of the “emerging culture of gentility and civility, which the elite embraced along with other aspects of Renaissance self-fashioning.”² In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, building on the rise of resorts such as Spa, in eastern Belgium, and Bath, England—a Christianized Roman shrine that Turner helped to popularize—“taking the waters” hit new heights of popularity.

The young republic followed fashion. Responding to a sense of cultural inferiority to Europe and other contemporary realities in the early republic, Americans flocked to mineral springs as part of a larger cultural appeal to picturesque landscapes and a sentimentalized mythology of the Native American past. The rural location of spas fit with the growing appeal to nature, fresh air, and natural scenery as a respite and restorative to those enervated by life in the city. Nature’s untapped bounty became emblematic of America’s hopeful prospect, an emerging sense of cultural nationalism framed by frequent appeals to providence.³ In Stringfellow’s view, the inexhaustible therapeutics bubbling up from the landscape betokened millennial import. “It would seem,” he wrote, “as if [God] designed, at some future day, to congregate in this mother

² Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 401.

³ On nation-building and appeals to nature in the early republic, see Perry Miller, *Nature’s Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics 1825–1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

of States, the invalids of the world, to taste his love and proclaim his praise.”⁴ If America received a special portion of this divine blessing, and Virginia more than other states in the union, then Fauquier County, home to the celebrated White Sulphur Springs, was singular. In his estimation, the White Sulphur was the near equal of the biblical Bethesda, containing a “power...infused by the Creator for the relief of suffering humanity.”⁵

To prove his point, in later issues of the *Religious Herald*, Stringfellow published dozens of instances of miraculous cures by the waters of everything from consumption to rheumatism. For the southern Baptist, such cures, no less than the narratives of recent revivals, intimated the march to the millennium when disease and death, already weakened, would die. The proof lay in science as well as scripture. Stringfellow wrote with evangelistic intent, hoping to “invite the superintending care of science in the administration and more speedily apprise the world of the immense value of these waters.”⁶ As Drew Gilpin Faust has noted, Stringfellow believed that “for the benevolence of these springs to be fully realized, men must come to understand God’s purpose in creating the waters. Just as he, as an interpreter of the Bible, devoted himself to expounding the spiritual remedy for sin, so scientists must interpret for man the physical remedies offered ‘immediately by the hand of God’ in nature.”⁷

⁴ Stringfellow, “Mineral Springs,” 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. Stringfellow later published his articles together as a pamphlet. *Two letters on cases of cure at Fauquier White Sulphur Springs; embracing, also, mineral waters in general* (Washington: Printed at the Union Office, 1851).

⁷ Drew Gilpin Faust, “Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument: the Reverend Thornton Stringfellow of Virginia,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 85:1 (Jan. 1977), 9.

Several thousand miles away, someone was attempting to do just that. In September 1850, a few weeks after Stringfellow's first piece appeared in *The Religious Herald*, a medical doctor named Henry Foster opened a water-cure establishment in the village of Clifton Springs, New York, just outside of Rochester. Born in Norwich, Vermont, in 1821, Foster was raised Methodist. In 1835, after his father lost his money in an unfortunate deal in the oil business, the family moved to Rochester. Hard work and family connections led to an opportunity for Foster to study at college, which in turn led to medical school in Cincinnati. Shortly after becoming a doctor in 1848, Foster moved to Utica, New York, to become house physician at the New Graefenberg Water Cure. While at New Graefenberg, Foster experienced Methodist sanctification. At two o'clock in the morning, he wrote, "the heavens opened, and the glory of God descended upon me, filling the room, and filling my whole being. When I came to myself, I was a changed man, with other principles, ambitions, and aspirations in my heart."⁸ These new ambitions included founding a Cure. Foster described receiving a vision "mental and spiritual, and not to the natural eye," that recalled Jacob's ladder: "men and women coming and going, from all parts of the world, receiving blessings and going home, and others coming, receiving and going."⁹ Foster's institution would make special provision for the care of ministers, missionaries, and Sunday school teachers. All would pay whatever they could afford and stay as long as they desired.

Foster made his first trip to Clifton Springs in 1849, drawn by the fame of its sulphur water, whose chemical properties closely resembled those of Stringfellow's White

⁸ Samuel Hawley Adams, *The Life of Henry Foster, M.D.* (Rochester, NY: Rochester Times-Union, 1921), 18.

⁹ Adams, *Life of Henry Foster*, 21.

Sulphur. In those days, the town was little more than a clutch of houses, the spring mired in a swamp. In 1825, a bathhouse had been built north of the main spring, which was frequented by whites as well as local Seneca Indians. Foster purchased the entire site and on September 13, 1850, the Cure opened to guests. Unlike Stringfellow's White Sulphur, where visitors drank or soaked in warm mineral waters in a leisurely setting, Clifton Springs Water-Cure was all business. The daily regimen began at 6 a.m., with the first bath of the day, followed by a walk and breakfast at seven. In an effort to drive out impurities in the blood or organs, patients were wrapped in wet sheets for hours and made to stand beneath frigid cataracts of water, punctuating their treatments with simple meals that avoided caffeine, alcohol, and often meat.¹⁰

Despite the differences between spas and water-cures, the two systems held a common commitment to the belief that nature itself furnished the best means of attaining physical health and vitality, surpassing the techniques of the available medical arts. Stringfellow and Foster—a Baptist minister from the antebellum South and a Methodist doctor from the heart of the “burned-over district”—shed light on early evangelical engagement with the therapeutic potential of water as an expression of broader cultural commitments to “nature cure” within the progressive spiritual life. First, their cases illustrate how the rising powers attributed to nature did not seem to diminish the belief that such cures were dependant on divine power. Rather than resisting scientific study of mineral springs as threatening to displace the supernatural, evangelicals actively promoted chemical analysis of the waters as a means to establish their divine origin. In addition to justifying the appropriation and adaptation of sites once sacred to Native American belief and practice, scientific demonstration of the springs' therapeutic value

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

helped distinguish nineteenth-century Protestant spas from the “superstitious” water of Lourdes and other healing wells patronized by their Catholic competitors.

A consideration of practices of water therapy within the frame of a progressive vision of the religious life also illumines how evangelicals approached the healing power of nature as a mark of divine benevolence and a universal gift to creation, available to Christian and heathen, humans and animals alike. For the regenerate, the pursuit of bodily health and healing was a powerful analog to spiritual conversion and an expression of the “new life” in Christ that sought an ever-deepening share of scriptural holiness and purity. Yet God invited not only saint but also sinner, as Stringfellow put it, to “taste his love” at nature’s table. Evangelicals appropriated mineral spring and water-cure therapies, like homeopathy and other “irregular” medical movements of the period, not simply for their promises of physical healing but as a mode of pre-evangelism, working to open the spiritual ears of men and women to a set of analogical correspondences between water and blood, matter and spirit, morbidity and vitality. Pure water could heal the body. But the true miracle occurred when nature pointed a wayward sinner to the font of immortality. Properly administered, nature could approach the power of a converting ordinance. As the promoter of one northern mineral spring begged his readers:

Behold the fountain mercy here supplies,
And from this minor pool direct your eyes
To that much richer fount, which heals the soul.¹¹

Finally, consideration of evangelical engagement with nature as a healing agent reveals one dimension of evangelical engagement with vitalism. It is a truism that evangelicals valued practical over systematic or speculative forms of knowledge. John

¹¹ Erastus Root, *An Inaugural Dissertation on the Chemical and Medicinal Properties of the Mineral Spring in Guilford* (Brattleborough, Vt.: Simeone Ide, 1817), 15.

Wesley and other evangelical leaders condemned such forms of theological reflection as a drag on piety and fuel for factionalism that hindered the work of revival. So, too, they generally skirted speculation on the precise mechanism or agency by which God accomplished remarkable cures through nature. Even so, faith sought understanding, and popular practice begged the question. Were nature cures an expression of distant, benevolent design or of a more immediate, active force? Were they the result of following “nature’s laws,” of miracles (enlisting supernatural action that violated those laws), or of some intermediary agency? The answers evangelicals gave varied depending on the genre of expression. In scientific writing, they tended to adhere to Baconian standards of observation and description, while poetry, hymns, and similar forms of expression allowed greater freedom to personify nature as an intermediary and to defend a practical vitalism, a sense of nature’s enchantment that escaped the orthodox binaries of providential design and miraculous intervention. The strange and rare properties of mineral springs produced puzzlement. As wonders, mineral springs seemed to bubble up from the muddy middle ground between the regular, orderly operation of natural laws and the special, supernatural interruption or contravention of those laws, commonly known as miracles. At times, they seemed to buck against the limits of their theological vocabulary, a vocabulary that constantly threatened to exile God from his creation or identify him too closely with it. In their devotion to practice, however, they demonstrated a commitment to vitalism, affirming the animate and inanimate creation as enlivened by spirit, albeit one that required negotiation with orthodox conceptions of providence and official Protestant opposition to divine intermediaries.

For many practitioners, mineral springs were therapeutic landscapes that healed social and communal division as well as individual disease, paradise gardens that

anticipated the millennial earth, where lion would lay down with lamb. Just as the springs could mend the suffering body and point the soul to the fountain overflowing with Christ's blood, so too they possessed the power to heal enmities between whites and Native Americans and to overwhelm narrow theological prejudice dividing the body of Christ. While the Bible seemed at times to split Protestants as often as it united them, the book of nature provided common ground to accommodate even ancient enemies engaged in a shared pursuit of vitality.

Nature-Cure and the New Life

Foster entered the medical profession at a time of turmoil and transition. His medical training in Cleveland had followed the theory and methods of the dominant “heroic” model of medicine exemplified by Benjamin Rush, professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Therapeutic heroism championed aggressive treatments such as bloodletting, blistering, vomiting, and intestinal purging through administration of harsh chemical compounds such as calomel. The ineffectual efforts of orthodox doctors in stemming the yellow fever epidemics in the early 1800s and cholera in 1832 helped to spur popular revolt against heroics. More and more, people began to wonder whether orthodox medicine might be killing more than curing.¹² In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, this general mood of disaffection encouraged more-organized popular health-reform movements, notably Thomsonianism (which substituted calomel for botanical preparations, especially pukeweed [*lobelia inflata*], an emetic), homeopathy

¹² Charlene M. Boyer Lewis, *Ladies and Gentlemen on Display: Planter Society at the Virginia Springs, 1790–1860* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 71.

(which administered minute doses of drugs), and hydropathy.¹³ Though the systems differed in a number of respects, all affirmed the view, increasingly common among Americans, that nature possessed miraculous healing powers. In contrast to Rush, who instructed his students to “always treat nature in a sick room as you would a noisy dog or cat drive[;] her out at the door and lock it upon her,” medical reformers appealed directly to the healing power of nature.¹⁴ Over and against the perceived arrogance of mainstream medicine, “irregular medicine” (a term of abuse coined by its critics) presented its methods in relatively humble terms. “Natural healing,” James Whorton writes, “worked hand in hand with the *vis mediatrix naturae* [the healing power of nature] to support and strengthen its activities.” While art was still required of the medical practitioner, it was just as important to know when and how to get out of the way to allow nature to heal itself.¹⁵

Like other early Americans, evangelicals were drawn to the therapeutic promises of mineral waters. Francis Asbury wrote of retiring to mineral springs to repair his worn-

¹³ Given the variety of antebellum practices that enlist the therapeutic use of water (hot and cold, mineral and plain, spa and water-cure), for the purposes of this chapter, I reserve the term “hydropathy” for practices pertaining specifically to the water-cure movement. I use the term “hydrotherapy” to cover a more inclusive range of water treatments, encompassing spa and water-cure regimes. On hydropathy, see Jane Donegan, *Hydropathic Highway to Health: Women and Water-Cure in Antebellum America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1996); Susan Cayleff, *Wash and Be Healed: The Water-Cure Movement and Women’s Health* (Temple University Press, 1981); Harry B. Weiss and Howard R. Kemble, *The Great American Water-Cure Craze: A History of Hydropathy in the United States* (Trenton, N.J.: The Past Times Press, 1967). On antebellum spa culture, see Thomas Chambers, *Drinking the Waters: Creating an American Leisure Class at Nineteenth-Century Mineral Springs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002); Theodore Corbett, *The Making of American Resorts: Saratoga Springs, Ballston Spa, Lake George* (2001), esp. ch. 11; Lewis, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, esp. pp. 57–78.

¹⁴ James C. Whorton, *Nature Cures: The History of Alternative Medicine in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Ladies and Gentlemen on Display*, 71; Whorton, *Nature Cures*, 9.

down body and restore his energies before returning again to the trail.¹⁶ Lorenzo Dow and his wife, Peggy, made frequent visits to a number of American mineral springs, including White Sulphur Springs and Saratoga Springs, often for Peggy's health.¹⁷ After living in the woods as a recluse and wrestling with demons for three years, William Glendinning chose to restart his public ministry as a Methodist itinerant at a mineral spring, to which he had repaired for several days after being spiritually "raised from the dead."¹⁸ Congregationalists found equal attraction in the healing powers of nature. Lyman Beecher and two of his daughters, Harriet and Catharine, were such devout proponents of hydropathy that the *Water-Cure Journal* singled them out as pioneers.¹⁹ Other evangelicals preserved the colonial New England tradition of the "angelical conjunction," uniting the offices of preacher and physician.²⁰ The Methodist itinerant Billy Hibbard prescribed a cure to a woman bed-ridden for twelve years, instructing her to wake before dawn and take a glass of "cold spring water" running out of the west side of a hill, add a teaspoon of Indian meal, and then "pray to the Lord." Hibbard claimed

¹⁶ *Francis Asbury*, *Journal of Rev. Francis Asbury*, Vol. I (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1786), 515. For other instances, see Hannah Syng Bunting, *Memoir, Diary and Letters of Miss Hannah Syng Bunting*, Vol. 1 (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, for the Sunday school union of the Methodist Episcopal church, 1837), 157. Bunting, who suffered from consumption, wrote of crossing a mountain to visit a mineral spring near Asbury, New Jersey.

¹⁷ Peggy Dow, *Vicissitudes in the Wilderness; exemplified, in the Journal of Peggy Dow* 5th ed. (Norwich, Conn.: William Faulkner, 1833), 66–9, 113.

¹⁸ William Glendinning, *The Life of William Glendinning, Preacher of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Printed for the author at the office of W.W. Woodward, 1795), 46–7.

¹⁹ "The Beecher Family," *Water-Cure Journal, & Herald of Reforms* 8:6 (Dec. 1, 1849), 190.

²⁰ On the "angelical conjunction," see Patricia Ann Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction: The Preacher-Physicians of Colonial New England* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

that after a week, the woman was strong enough to pray while walking fifty yards “in a pure air,” which he felt to be “the best part of the remedy.”²¹

While Henry Foster was committed to the use of hydropathy, it was not an exclusive engagement. Following common practice, he incorporated homeopathy into his treatment, a combinative approach facilitated by the medical systems’ shared metaphysic. Despite differences in treatment—hydropaths used water, homeopaths used minute doses of drugs, Thomsonians used herbs—most systems of natural healing appealed to a vitalist cosmology. As James Whorton writes, vitalism asserted that the body was “activated and directed by a life force that is unique to living organisms and that transcends the laws of physics and chemistry used to account for the phenomena of the inorganic world.” For some nature-cure practitioners, Whorton writes, the vital force was identical with the soul, while others equated it with the *vis medicatrix*.²²

As historians of early modern science have pointed out, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century appeal of vitalism drew in part on fears of a latent materialism and reductionism lurking in the mechanistic model of the universe. While proponents of a mechanistic natural philosophy presented nature’s laws as testimonies of God’s benevolence, deists and freethinkers turned such logic on its head, casting God as an absentee landlord. As Alexandra Walsham has written, rather than unambiguously

²¹ Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel* (Printed for and published by the author, J. C. Totten, printer, 1825), 258–9. It is unclear from Hibbard’s text whether he attributed the “best part of the remedy” to the prayer or the air.

²² Whorton, *Nature Cures*, 10.

affirming orthodox notions of divine sovereignty, a mechanistic physics “could be utilized to evacuate the divine from the physical environment.”²³

But vitalism spoke not only to fears but also to the sense of hope and optimism inspired by signs of religious renewal.²⁴ In the events associated with the Second Great Awakening and the spread of global missions, believers saw signs of the millennium. The Hutchinson Family Singers, a Baptist-bred quartet from New Hampshire known as the “Tribe of Jesse,” read eschatological import into nature-cure practices. Their song “Cold Water” praised medical reformers who had swept aside invented traditions that had crippled civilization for centuries, restoring primitive cures lost to humanity since the days of Christ:

²³ Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 394. For recent treatments of vitalism in early modern science and culture, see P. M. Harman, *The Culture of Nature in Britain 1680–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). On the attraction of vitalism in New England Puritanism, see Brett Grainger, “Vital Piety and Vital Nature: Johann Arndt and the Evangelical Vitalism of Cotton Mather,” *Church History* 81:4 (December 2012): 852–872. On mechanistic models of the universe, see Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940); Jacques Roger, “The Mechanistic Conception of Life,” in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 277–295; Gary B. Deason, “Reformation Theology and the Mechanistic Conception of Nature,” 167–191.

²⁴ In attending to the sense of millennial optimism and cultural confidence motivating nineteenth-century nature-cure reforms, I follow the lead of Hartmut Lehmann, who has suggested that greater attention to the role of Pietism and transnational revivalism has the potential to reshape our understanding of the history of secularization. Lehmann argues for a new history of the modern West focused on “caesura” (interruptions) other than the usual suspects, such as the French Revolution. Instead, the new narrative would be built around events dealing with the drive to establish the Kingdom of God. “International and interdisciplinary Pietism research,” he writes, “may be the first step toward a new history of the Western world that, in turn, may provide a means to reconsider the whole of modern history.” Hartmut Lehmann, “Pietism in the World of Transatlantic Religious Revivals,” in Jonathan Strom, Hartmut Lehmann, and James Van Horn Melton, eds., *Pietism in Germany and North America, 1680–1820* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009), 18.

Full eighteen hundred years or more—
 These truths have been before us,
And yet have blind delusive clouds
 Seemed madly hovering o'er us.
The lep'rous men of Judea,
 And lame who scarce could totter,
Were cured of all their maladies
 In Jordan's healing water.²⁵

The pragmatic and optimistic bent of evangelical piety was also a spur to medical eclecticism, the belief that all that was useful might be combined. Henry Foster's eclectic habits spread beyond homeopathy to include a smattering of electrotherapy, air cure, early mind-cure, and faith healing. He sought out what he called "higher unities" in theology and in medical practice alike, displaying an ecumenism that prized unity in essentials ahead of scholastic precision. Foster would "attack disease from all sides," wrote Samuel Adams, his biographer. "He would accept anything of demonstrated efficiency."²⁶ Foster's eclecticism looked back to the primitive physic of John Wesley, who favored free combinations of any and all practical techniques with demonstrated efficiency over slavish adherence to any particular medical system. Wesley's pragmatism, in turn, looked back further to seventeenth-century divines such as Johann Arndt. Arndt, who received medical training before his turn to the ministry, modeled a method of combining disparate strands of doctrine and practice, which he described as *colligere* ("to read together").²⁷

²⁵ Asa B. Hutchinson, *The Granite Songster: Comprising the songs of the Hutchinson family, without the music* (Boston: A. B. Hutchinson; New York: Charles Holt, 1847), 32.

²⁶ Adams, *Life of Henry Foster*, 25. According to Adams, Foster anticipated the discoveries of "Emmanuel Movement" of Boston. "'Allopathy,' 'Water Cure,' 'Homeopathy,' 'Mind Cure,' 'Faith Cure,' were to him members of a group in the therapeutic family. He never shifted about, but incorporated and adopted, looking for the higher unity." Adams, *Life of Henry Foster*, 26.

Regardless of the means employed, nature's cures originated in divine presence and power. For evangelicals, the vitality of the organic system depended on daily identification with the source of life itself. Foster described Clifton Spring's chapel as the "heart center" of the Cure, where "many a patient has claimed to have received fresh accessions of spiritual life which have reacted upon his physical nature and promoted his return to health and strength."²⁸ Clifton Springs was not, Samuel Adams argued, "a conglomeration of several excellent features—it is a life. The kernal...is the relation which exists between given spiritual conditions and bodily health."²⁹ However frequently Foster appealed to the language of nature's laws to describe his method, healing at Clifton Springs was regarded as a divine prerogative. "The Lord Jesus Christ is the real healer," he wrote. "No pathy—hydropathy, allopathy, homeopathy, electropathy, or any other pathy, has ever healed a man."³⁰

As medical diagnosis of disease grew more specific and sophisticated, the ancient link between sickness and sin grew more tenuous. Yet, evangelicals continued to press the

²⁷ On the primitive physic of John Wesley, see Deborah Madden, "Medicine and Moral Reform: The Place of Practical Piety in John Wesley's Art of Physic," *Church History* 73:4 (Dec. 2004), 741–758; Randy Maddox, "John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing," *Methodist History* 46:1 (Oct. 2007), 4–33. Without suggesting any unbroken chain of influence, I would argue that Arndtian *colligere* offers an influential early example of spiritual eclecticism within evangelical cultural practice, one that both anticipates and critiques Catherine Albanese's notion of combinativeness in religious traditions. While Albanese's category of combinativeness assumes no set boundaries to what may be incorporated or rejected, Arndtian *colligere* functioned within a framework of Lutheran theology, which regarded scripture as the test of what may be profitably combined. On combinativeness, see Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

²⁸ Adams, *Life of Henry Foster*, 90.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

connection between primitive physic and primitive piety. Though the sick were not to be blamed for their suffering, there was no excuse for those who did not seek healing in prayer and personal holiness. In Foster's view, the physician worked to establish "healthful spiritual conditions" in the patient.³¹ As with eclecticism and *colligere*, this view of the complementarity of spiritual health and physical health built on earlier tradition. John Wesley instructed Methodist lay assistants to leave behind books during their visits to local societies that could be of ongoing use to members. He highlighted two books that should be in every home: Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* and his own *Primitive Physic*.³² The work of holiness concerned the whole believer, body and soul.

If the complaints of mainstream physicians are to be trusted, Protestant ministers were prominent promoters of the new "medical heterodoxy." In May 1851, the annual meeting in Philadelphia of the State Society of the Mercer County (Pennsylvania) Medical Society, reported:

We have in this county a very hotbed of empiricism: quackery of every species flourishes here; so that with 'water doctors,' 'herb doctors,' 'Indian doctors,' and every other kind of 'doctors,' in common phrase, we have more than an equal host in point of numbers to contend with. It is to be regretted that many of the most influential citizens lend their aid and give support to such arrant pretenders. Ministers of the Gospel, especially among the more educated portion of the community, are prone to countenance and encourage medical heresy.³³

³¹ Ibid., 23. James Whorton argues that "Physical Puritanism" was a central principle of the American water-cure movement, representing, in the words of one practitioner, the goal of a "PURE BODY—a body free from all foreign and unassimilable substances—a body washed and cleansed from all corruption and putrefaction." Quoted in Whorton, *Nature Cures*, 85.

³² Maddox, "John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing," 8.

³³ Quoted in Weiss and Kemble, *The Great American Water-Cure Craze*, 52. Jane Donegan mentions antebellum critics of water-cure who blamed Protestant clergy for "patronizing quacks and endorsing nostrums." See Donegan, "*Hydropathic Highway to Health*," 11.

For many evangelicals, the appeal of hydrotherapy and other nature-cure techniques was boosted by a perceived sympathy between medical and religious reform. Samuel Hawley Adams described Henry Foster's decision to found Clifton Springs as a protest against the "existing conditions in medicine," a declaration that he compared to the "memorable theses which Martin Luther nailed against the door of the church at Wittenberg."³⁴ Billy Hibbard relished the contested status of nature-cure within mainstream medical circles, rattling sabers with allopaths as readily as Calvinists. "Let doctors call that quackery if they dare," he wrote.³⁵

The perceived sympathy between religious and medical reform was also strengthened by the more general turn in the early republic toward a culture of democratization.³⁶ As citizens discovered new political, religious, and economic possibilities in the wake of the American Revolution, the rhetoric of nature-cure encouraged Americans to take control of their own physical health, promoting an informal physicianhood of all patients.³⁷ In many cases, especially on the frontier, this was

³⁴ Adams, *Life of Henry Foster*, 165. Catherine Albanese has made a similar point regarding H. C. Foote's attraction to medical reform: "for H. C. Foote, Priessnitz had done for medicine what Martin Luther had done for Christianity." Catharine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 140.

³⁵ Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life*, 259.

³⁶ See Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

³⁷ Michael G. Kenny has argued that the appeal of Thomsonian medicine was based in part on linkages between religious reform and medical reform, as eliminating intermediaries (priestly or medical). In his study of Elias Smith, the New England preacher, journalist, and herbal physician, Kenny describes Smith's adaptation of Samuel Thomson's medical system as a form of primitivism: "Disease arrived with the fall of man, but it is God's intent to restore all of creation to him, to which end he has provided his creatures, human and beast alike, with the means to sustain and heal themselves within

more of necessity than choice. Guests at Hot Springs, Arkansas, in the 1830s largely kept their own counsel in designing a therapeutic regime suited to their particular ailments. “The patients take the water on their own advice as they find it and as seems best to them,” wrote George Engelmann. “They drink, bathe, and sweat, as they say, however they like, quite irregularly and extremely.”³⁸

Water and Blood: Hydrotherapy and the Analogical Argument

In 1817, Erastus Root published the results of his analysis of the mineral waters of his hometown of Guilford, Vermont. Born into an old New England family in 1789, Root studied under a local Congregationalist minister and attended Williams College before transferring to the University of Vermont, where he continued in the study of medicine. Root had a keen interest in the healing properties of mineral springs, and in 1817, the same year he received his medical degree, he published the results of his analysis of the mineral waters of his hometown of Guilford. In his conclusion, Root suggested that contemplation of the healing properties of the spring offered a window on divine realities, an opportunity to look through nature up to nature’s God.

Behold the fountain mercy here supplies,
And from this minor pool direct your eyes
To that much richer fount, which heals the soul.³⁹

the limits of mortal existence. Nature should therefore be our guide, not human artifice—the false systems and harmful drugs of the medical pharisees, the regular doctors.” Michael G. Kenny, *The Perfect Law of Liberty: Elias Smith and the Providential History of America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 195.

³⁸ Jerome Jansma, Harriet H. Jansma, and George Engelmann, “George Engelmann in Arkansas Territory,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 50.3 (Autumn, 1991), 243.

³⁹ Root, *Inaugural Dissertation*, 15.

Root's verse gestured to an analogical structure governing the cosmos, a set of correspondences between water and blood, matter and spirit, earth and heaven, nature's body and Christ's body, and the economies of bodily vitality and the salvation of souls. Like William Stringfellow, he evangelized nature's provisions for physical healing as a shadow or type of the spiritual regeneration found in Christ's blood. While every soul might derive physical benefit from the waters, only the converted could comprehend their spiritual significance. But with any luck, the miraculous waters might trouble the consciences of the ungodly, moving them to repentance and the receipt of saving grace.

The appeal of therapeutic springs drew on deep theological wells. For those raised on the stories of the Bible, hydrotherapy had powerful symbolic resonance. Water is a pervasive image in scripture, appearing throughout as a symbol for purity, healing, and divine grace. Bodies of water figured prominently as places of miraculous healing. In the Hebrew Bible, God cured Naaman the Syrian of leprosy by instructing him to bathe in the River Jordan. In the gospels, Jesus instructed a blind man to wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam, restoring his sight. The crippled and infirm crowded around the pool of Bethesda, waiting for an angel to trouble the surface of the waters. Just as believers layered American hills with allusions to Sinai and the Mount of Olives, visitors to antebellum spas and water-cures were apt to invoke Bethesda and Siloam to account for the wonder-working power they witnessed. Through such small acts, evangelicals constructed a spiritual landscape that enhanced practices and beliefs bound up with the new life in Christ.

Surprisingly, the biblical passage most commonly invoked by evangelicals in support of hydrotherapy, the story of Moses smiting the rock at Horeb, had nothing to do with physical cures. When Hiram Ricker, the proprietor of Poland Spring in Poland,

Maine, attempted to grow the family business, he proposed a new container for his bottled mineral waters that might more directly announce their special properties. Ricker settled on a twelve-inch glass bottle molded in the form of the Hebrew prophet, complete with long beard and robe (see Appendix, image 5). The “Moses” bottle established a material link between the miraculous events at Horeb and the elixir whose “absolute purity” was credited with a curing a vast array of diseases.⁴⁰ In the 1840s, the decade in which water-cure became a national obsession, popular religious annuals frequently included lithographs of Moses at Horeb. Annuals and gift books such as *The Fountain* printed illustrations of the miracle at Horeb alongside poems and short stories dramatizing the scene.⁴¹ Richard Howitt’s short story, “Smiting the Rock,” turned the biblical crisis of faith into a reflection on religious indifference in contemporary America.⁴² Just as the “rebel” crowd demanded relief and murmured grievances against God, so “countless are the sufferers still / Sad wanderers of an evil will; / And still ascends the feverish cry, / ‘Give us to drink or else we die.’” Howitt wondered if the “waters of eternal power” flowing from Jesus, the “living rock,” had been spilled “in

⁴⁰ Francis H. Chapelle, *Wellsprings: A Natural History of Bottled Spring Waters* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 74.

⁴¹ For instance, see the lithographic plate, “Moses Smiting the Rock” on page 79 of H. Hastings Weld, *The Fountain: a gift, “to stir up the pure mind by way of remembrance”* (Philadelphia: William Sloanaker, 1847), accompanying H. Hastings Weld’s poem, “The Waters of Meribah” on the facing page. The title page of *The Fountain* includes the following “Inscription for a Way-Side Fountain”:

Drink, weary Pilgrim, if athirst thou be,
 Know that the stream is gushing forth for thee!
 Drink, in CHRIST’S name,—life’s painful way who trod,
 Man gives the cup—the Living Water, God.

⁴² For another example, see “The smiting of Horeb,” a short story by Benson J. Lossing in *Odd Fellows’ Offering for 1848* (New York, 1847), 7–12, accompanied by a plate of the scene by Thompkins Harrison Mattheson.

vain.” There were “thousands, standing on its brink,” wrote Howitte, who “Behold the stream, who never drink.” For evangelicals invested in hydrotherapy, the theological lessons were patent. The poem opened with a quotation from scripture that framed the issue neatly: “[Moses] called the name of the place Massah, and Meribah...because they tempted the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”⁴³

It was a question that evangelicals asked themselves continually. Cultivating an experiential knowledge of the divine presence, its felt reality in the heart, was the quintessence of evangelical belief and practice. The question, of course, was precisely how God was present in the working of these rare and powerful waters. Evangelicals embraced the language of law and design to think about God’s operation in the world; yet, they pressed against the restrictions that language imposed. While evangelical practice emphasized the cultivation of the intimate presence of God, natural law seemed to put God at a distance from his creation. To overcome this dilemma, some reached back to an older language of occult powers. Like the parable of the yeast, the spirit worked its catalysis in secret, pervading the dough and lifting it into new forms. But such language invited its own dangers, including the suggestion of divine intermediaries other than Christ.

Movement and Flow

In ways difficult for most modern Americans to understand, water played a fundamental role in determining the fortunes of individuals and communities in the antebellum landscape. Its predictable, even flow was the foundation of civilization,

⁴³ Richard Howitt, “Smiting the Rock,” in John Sartain, *The Rosemary: a collection of sacred and religious poetry from the English and American poets: with elegant illustrations* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1849), 82.

securing the exchange of commerce and communication with the outside world. Its absence or overabundance, in drought or in flood, could kill slowly or suddenly. Water was ambivalent: essential to life but difficult to master and control. Moving water was potable water, supporting families and livestock. Stagnant water represented death. Swamps were widely believed to generate miasmatic clouds of poisonous air caused by rotting organic matter. Miasmas were blamed for cholera and other epidemics, especially in the South. In religious terms, swamps that mired horses and carts also suggested spiritual trials and temptations—the “slough of despond,” as John Bunyan put it—retarding the pilgrim’s progress to Canaan.

Mineral springs yielded the opposite spiritual valence. The reliable flow of mineral waters, especially in times of drought, signaled the constancy of divine love. Unlike creeks and rivers that retreated to a trickle or swelled suddenly without warning, mineral waters, which sprang from hidden depths, never ran dry or opened to flood. Just as a fast-moving river broke up jams and freed up blockages, so the roiling, effervescent waters when ingested or taken cutaneously were believed to free up blockages and push out the “bad stuff.” As ministers like William Stringfellow invited the Holy Spirit to move among men and women and work upon their hearts of stone, so hydrotherapeutic physicians used water to break up the blockages of putrid matter in the human body, restoring order, flow, and vital function to the entire system.

Evangelicals, trained to perceive the invisible in the things that are made, sensed the spiritual values of water more acutely than most. For those already converted, Christ promised increasingly greater portions of vitality. “I am come that they might have life,”

said Christ, “and that they might have it more abundantly.”⁴⁴ The new life of the believer progressing in faith was seen as a preparation for fuller joys, a slow and steady race ramping up to the millennial earth and the spiritual body. Spas and water-cures at places like Stafford, Clifton, or White Sulphur Springs became gardens visited by a presence of which water was both symbol and sacrament. Visitors partook in regular public rituals of drinking and immersing in evident manifestations of God’s provision for human frailty. At Stafford Springs in 1807, religion framed the daily hygienic regime. Before breakfast, one English visitor wrote, “prayers, hymns, and chapters of the bible were required,” often led by a local clergyman. At the end of the day, after twenty or more tumblers of strange-smelling stuff had been quaffed, more hymns followed. A local Stafford favorite was “The Garden Hymn.” Popular at revivals throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the hymn visualized Christ enlivening the dead through images of a blooming garden from the creation narrative, the parable of the vine and the branches, and the love poetry of the Song of Songs:

The Lord into his garden comes,
The spices yield a rich perfume,
The lilies grow and thrive,
The lilies grow and thrive;
Refreshing showers of grace divine,
From Jesus flow to every vine,
And make the dead revive,
And make the dead revive.⁴⁵

For those new to the habit, the perfume of sulphur took some getting used to.

Even if the olfactory was reborn in conversion, it often had to be trained to hunger for

⁴⁴ John 10:10.

⁴⁵ Abner Jones, *The Melody of the Heart: Original and Selected Hymns for Social Devotion* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1804), 3. “The Garden Hymn” first appeared as the opening number in Jones’s collection. It reappeared in Jeremiah Ingalls’s *The Christian Harmony* (Exeter, NH: Henry Ranlet, 1805) and became a standard in many southern gospel compilations.

new smells. But for those who had acquired the right nose, the putrid stench of rotten eggs held the fragrance of flowers. One visitor to Clifton Springs wrote:

At first the newcomer turns up his nose at the sulphurous emanations, but he soon begins to relish the odor, and you will see him leaning over the iron railing that flanks the side-walk where the pretty little brooklet darts through a culvert under the main street, and inhaling the fumes as one regales his olfactories with the ottar of roses.⁴⁶

For those waiting in the garden of Lord, the landscape required reformation no less than the body. Through “incessant toil,” wrote one visitor to Clifton Springs, Foster had “converted a sulphur marsh into an earthly paradise.”⁴⁷ On the frontier, nature herself accomplished the necessary renovations. In 1835, George Engelmann described a spa in western Arkansas “on the border of civilized settlement.” Engelmann, a German immigrant and botanist whose father had trained for the ministry at Halle, found the rough-hewn resort a step down from the refined spas of his native land. The settlement in the side of the Ouachita Mountains consisted of a “few scruffy huts,” with livestock grazing freely. In many places below the cliffs, the springs had “carved out small bathtubs” or “little basins, by scourging into the rock.” The primitive bathing conditions contrasted with the luxuriant flora and fauna on display. Striving to capture for his reader “the wonder with which nature out of her pregnant depths brings forth these mighty streams,” Engelmann described how the springs had created an “oasis in a mountainous desert.” With the attention of a naturalist, he noted “how powerfully, from between the cracks in the rock, plants spring forth with bloom.” “Wonderful forms of ferns” covered the rocks with their “enchancing growth” and “all is covered in flowers of glorious colors.”

⁴⁶ J. Henrickson McCarty, “Clifton Springs,” *The Chautauquan*, Vol. 8 (Oct 1887–July 1888) Meadville, PA: L Flood Publishing House, 606.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Coldness was equated with death, the corpse. Heat was vitality. “How wonderfully the warmth affects things!” he wrote. Walking among the various steam baths and springs—the hottest running 150 degrees Fahrenheit, the highest dropping a hundred feet from the looming Ouachitas—the visitor took in “attractive perspectives and surprising views without great effort; nature has done so much here that a gardener might do only with the greatest effort and care.”⁴⁸

Temperance and the Analogical Argument

Following nature’s way was not only the best therapy. It was also the best form of prevention. Proponents of nature-cure preached a way of life exemplified by moderation and discipline in eating and drinking, forsaking spirits and the heavy, meat-based diets responsible for an epidemic of dyspepsia (indigestion) in antebellum America.

Evangelicals engaged in social and moral reform efforts saw providential synergy between temperance, religious renewal, and nature-cure. Water’s power to heal the body astonished, but what was truly miraculous was how it could repair fallen desire, bending it back toward God. The short story, “The Cup of Cold Water,” published in *The Temperance Offering, for 1853*, related the tale of an inebriate cured by drinking cold water. “Yes,” the protagonist announced triumphantly, “water is the medicine that cures the sickly craving for strong drink.”⁴⁹ Publicity brochures for springs such as Bethesda Mineral Water, in Waukesha, Wisconsin, supplied standard testimony of miraculous cures—diabetes, kidney stones, and the like—but also the pledge of a doctor who found

⁴⁸ Jansma and Jansma, “George Engelmann,” 234.

⁴⁹ T. S. Arthur, ed., *The Temperance Offering, for 1853* (New York: Cornish, Lamport & Co., 1853), 197.

the water “a delicious substitute for such poisonous drinks as alcoholic and mal liquors, the taste for which it thoroughly removes.” Water gave one a taste for different things.⁵⁰

Popular song of the period similarly linked water with the reformation of desire. In “Cold Water,” by the Hutchinson Family Singers, pure water approached the power of a converting ordinance:

Of all the blessed things below,
 Of our Creator’s giving
Assuaging almost every woe,
 And making life worth living,
For old and young, for high and low,
 Yea every son and daughter,
There’s nothing as a beverage,
 Like sparkling pure cold water.

Oh! if you would preserve your health
 And trouble never borrow,
Just take the morning shower bath,
 ’Twill drive away all sorrow.
And then instead of drinking rum,
 As doth the poor besotter;
For health, long life, and happiness,
 Drink nothing but cold water.⁵¹

If water functioned as a symbol of purity, alcohol represented pollution, its liquid antithesis. While evangelicals increasingly repudiated the link between sin and disease, temperance smuggled the ancient link back in. In pamphlets and poems, intemperance catapulted ahead of almost any other vice, the sad inebriate personifying the advanced stages of spiritual and physical malaise. In “The Mineral Spring,” the Methodist poet Caroline Matilda Thayer went so far as to recast the biblical account of the fall through the invention of alcohol. She opened the poem in a prelapsarian paradise, where pure

⁵⁰ A. Hawley Heath, *Bethesda Mineral Spring Water, Pewaukee, Waukesha, Wisconsin* (New York: [s.n.], 1875).

⁵¹ Hutchinson, *Granite Songster*, 32.

water “every want supplied” and disease and death were unknown until “pernicious art” distilled the “fiery draught” through a corruption of water by “noxious gas” and “philogistic fire,” bringing “Disease and all the family of pain.” “Death gigantic,” she wrote, “stalked on every plain.”⁵²

Baptists and Hydrotherapy: A Special Affinity?

As proponents of the power of ritual immersion in water, Baptists like the Hutchinson Family Singers had more reason than most to connect with the new craze for hydrotherapy. Since colonial times, Baptists had been in the habit of building their churches alongside bodies of water (compared to, say, Congregationalists, who tended to locate in the central intersection of town). As they believed that sacramental dipping marked the spiritual resurrection of the convert, so they came to believe that routine immersion in cold water might restore physical functions lost through unfortunate illness or an unhealthy lifestyle. In June 1843, Asa Hutchinson described in his journal the effect of bathing with his brothers in a river at home in Milford, New Hampshire. “How invigorating to the System,” he wrote. “O how much better it is to live temperately and as God has intended that we should live.”⁵³ Temperate living—exercising moderation and self-restraint, especially in refusing alcohol—found natural sympathy with cold-water bathing. What God intended, nature provided automatically for our needs.

⁵² Caroline Matilda Thayer, *Religion Recommended to Youth, in a Series of Letters Addressed to a Young Lady. To Which are Added, Poems on Various Occasions* (New York: Thomas Bakewell, 1817), 114.

⁵³ Dale Cockrell, ed. *Excelsior: Journals of the Hutchinson Family Singers, 1842–1846* (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1989), 153. This may indicate a disagreement between the “plain water” and “mineral water” arms of the hydrotherapeutic movement.

Of course, not every Baptist—or, for that matter, every Hutchinson—became an indiscriminating convert to all forms of water therapy. While performing at Saratoga Springs, Judson Hutchinson wrote that he tried the mineral waters and found that they did not suit him.⁵⁴ Others expressed their dissent more warmly. A contemporary lithograph of the Tree of Life depicts Christ crucified on the trunk of a living tree. On the “Broad Way” before him, a battle for humanity rages, pitting evangelists against devils who clutch at fashionable men and women. A litany of deadly sins and vices surrounds the figures, all of them traditional with one exception: “Quacks.”⁵⁵

Attacks on hydropaths and Baptists often employed similar themes. Each group in its own way parried attacks by those who viewed their core ritual as a foolish, dangerous habit. The German immigrant Nicholas Hesse reported that baptism by full immersion “causes coughs and colds.”⁵⁶ Others perceived a spiritual threat, including the specter of idolatry. Lucy Kenney penned a satirical poem about Alexander Campbell, leader of the Restoration Movement. “Alexander the Great, or the Learned Camel” described Campbell as “the hero [who] taught that all immersed, / Were born of God; and that immersion / Was the new birth, or conversion.” Proponents of water-cure may have heard their own practices impugned.

All ye sons of Adam’s race
Come and share this wat’ry grace,
Water gives the soul promotion,

Water is the healing lotion,
Water purifies the nation,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁵ “The Tree of Life,” lithographic print by Kellogg & Thayer (New York, 1846).

⁵⁶ Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 140.

Water is regeneration!
Ev'ry mother's son and daughter!
Here's the "*gospel in the water*."⁵⁷

Nevertheless, some defenders of hydrotherapy chose to enlist the natural sympathy between immersive baptism and water-cure to promote their therapeutic claims. The editors of one water-cure journal noted how, despite Baptists' proclivity for dipping in "the most inclement seasons of the year," it was a remarkable fact that "none are ever injured by it, however cold the water may be when it is performed." Benefit rather than injury was the likely result. The editors reported the story of a Baptist minister charged with initiating a large number of converts following a successful revival in the dead of winter. The minister, who suffered from rheumatism, became so chilled in the course of his duties that he required assistance to climb out of the river. After being taken to a nearby house and wrapped in warm blankets, he found his rheumatism miraculously cured. "Occasionally," the editors admitted, "he has had slight returns of the disease, which have been as often driven off by the application of cold water."⁵⁸

Purity and Pollution: Temptation, Temperance, and Separation from the World

Spas were places where evangelicals found purity but also pollution, where one might freely taste God's love but also endure temptation by all manner of lower loves.

⁵⁷ Lucy Kenney, *Alexander the Great, or, The learned camel* (Washington, D.C.: [s.n.], 1831). In other sources, the work is attributed to William Phillips. Italics in original.

⁵⁸ H. F. Phinney, Robert Wesselhoeft, *The Water Cure in America: Two Hundred and Twenty Cases of Various Diseases*. 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1848), 220. The same work reproduces a letter from William Livesey, a Methodist minister from Taunton, Massachusetts, written on March 30, 1847. In it, Livesey claims his "experiment" with water-cure has cured his consumption and restored him to usefulness in society. See Phinney and Wesselhoeft, 32.

Complaints of the immorality and general godlessness of the springs' clientele were widespread in the eighteenth century. In 1789, Francis Asbury described the guests at Bath, Virginia, as "sinners" and was shocked by the springs' "overflowing tide of immorality."⁵⁹ In the nineteenth century, the amusements available at these summer playgrounds—cards, horseracing, fancy balls, to name but a few—only multiplied. Writing from Saratoga Springs in 1826, Almira Hathaway Read complained that few of the hundreds of guests were "disposed to pass an hour in divine service. The pleasure parties and balls every evening in this village engross the attention of the old and young, sick and well, and this village place I fear will prepare more souls for destruction than these efficacious waters will ever heal infirm bodies."⁶⁰ Another guest was troubled by the fact that the hotel chapel doubled as a ballroom for six out of seven nights of the week. Religion, she wrote, was "very little thought of in this place, and surely, it ought to be made a place of prayer, where we all come in search of health."⁶¹ Timothy Dwight similarly blanched at the cocktail of hedonism and idleness. After visiting one resort, he feared that the springs "will contribute very little to the melioration of the human heart, or to the improvement of human matters."⁶²

In the American South, believers similarly feared that a serpent had entered the garden. Spectacles of dancing, drinking, fancy dressing, and Sabbath-breaking roused

⁵⁹ Francis Asbury, *Journal of Rev. Francis Asbury* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1786), I: 191.

⁶⁰ Cited in Chambers, *Drinking the Waters*, 104.

⁶¹ Eliza Law to William Law, 14 August 1835, William Law Correspondence, Duke; quoted in Chambers, *Drinking the Waters*, 104.

⁶² Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, ed. Barbara Miller Solomon (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1969 [1821-22]), 3: 294; quoted in Chambers, *Drinking the Waters*, 115.

their indignation and outrage. The “fashion and extravagance & show” at White Sulphur convinced Lucy Baytop that “surely Satan has his seat here.” Paulina Storrs thought it “was like Sodom and Gomorrah was when it was destroyed with fire and brimstone. The people seem to be given up to the gratification of every sin.”⁶³ Even William Stringfellow worried that his beloved White Sulphur’s reputation as a “fashionable resort” for the healthy had overshadowed the miraculous power of its waters, driving away the serious figures of medical science who had the ability to “ascertain their action and proclaim their virtues” to sufferers around the world struggling with dyspepsia, consumption, dropsy, and diseases of the kidney.⁶⁴

In truth, religion never played a prominent role at the springs in their heyday. Nevertheless, or perhaps as a result, evangelical ministers preached there regularly and hotly, often commandeering a ballroom to wag their fingers at the denizens of Gomorrah. Some guests made a game effort to reform the culture. In 1844, John H. Cocke, noting an increase in the number of the serious minded at Warm Springs, Virginia, attempted to convince the proprietor to build a church on his property. His hopes were crushed when the gentleman opted instead for a gambling house. William Stringfellow’s White Sulphur Springs fared no better. Between 1790 and 1860, the owners of the Virginia resort erected hundreds of buildings, none of them a church. Needless to say, temperance efforts made even less headway. Writing from Red Sweet Springs, Virginia, Mary Blackford lamented, “The Temperance cause seems at a low ebb at these Springs; some of the people seem to think they must take a julep on coming out of the bath.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Lewis, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 193.

⁶⁴ Stringfellow, “Mineral Springs,” 1.

Despite such protests, a good number of the godly returned each season. As Charlene M. Boyer Lewis notes, southern evangelicals participated in many of the “rules and rituals of genteel society and generally considered themselves refined” but “refused to participate in the display and competition, and struggled against the temptations of spa life.” If a sermon could not be had on the grounds on Sunday, guests trekked into the nearby town, or retreated into their rooms for prayer and Bible study.⁶⁶

Evangelicals at northern springs may have taken greater steps at separation from the world. Hotels such as Union Hall in Saratoga Springs developed reputations as “pious house[s]” popular with clergymen. In such accommodations, wrote one contemporary observer, “it is not considered unfashionable by the guests to spend the evening in their great room, singing hymns and praying.” In general, ministers conducting services at southern and northern springs alike kept matters “primitive and fraught with old associations...when our fathers worshipped God without any of those striking aids to devotion, which the increasing wealth, luxury, and improvements of society have established.”⁶⁷ Primitive piety flourished in league with primitive physic.

Henry Foster went farther than most in his attempts to reform the therapeutic landscape. During his stint at New Graefenberg, he became convinced that conventional water-cure establishments were in need of reform, having become, as his biographer put

⁶⁵ Lewis, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 194.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁶⁷ Chambers, *Drinking the Waters*, 103. See also the account of Saratoga’s “Religious Hotel” in Andrew Reed and James Matheson, *A Narrative of the Visit to the American Churches*, Vol. 1 (London: Jackson and Walford, 1835), 320: “Its name preserves its character; the religious are attracted by it; and as clergymen are usually staying here, domestic worship is observed, and not only most of the occupants, but many from the other inns attend.”

it, “too selfish and secular in spirit.”⁶⁸ Unlike Cures that placed religion on the periphery, Clifton Springs built its therapeutic regime around spiritual practice. Under Foster’s influence, three weeks after opening for business, a revival broke out at the Cure. Foster faced a revolt from a number of the more “educated and refined” clientele, who, he claimed, “didn’t believe in putting man’s spiritual interests first, but insisted upon the old plan of dancing, tableaux, card playing and everything that would amuse.”⁶⁹ They packed their bags and went to Saratoga.

The Healing Landscape and the Native American Past

The nineteenth-century rise of nature-cure relied not only on changing ideas of medicine and health but also on complex processes of cultural appropriation and adaptation. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious reformers in Britain and on the Continent participated in the widespread suppression, rediscovery, and transformation of medieval holy wells into therapeutic spas, a process that Alexandra Walsham has described as a “reformation of the landscape.” The themes, patterns, and tensions identified by Walsham in European Protestantism’s “serendipitous rediscovery” of holy wells were, she writes, “part of a wider pattern of periodic eclipse and revival that neither began with the Reformation nor was brought to an end by it.”⁷⁰

Patterns of eclipse and revival played out differently on the antebellum landscape than in the towns and countryside of early modern Britain. When American Protestants appropriated and renovated mineral springs sites for their exclusive use, it was not

⁶⁸ Adams, *Life of Henry Foster*, 27.

⁶⁹ Adams, *Life of Henry Foster*, 34.

⁷⁰ Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 416.

Roman Catholic pilgrims who were displaced but Native Americans.⁷¹ The early American “discovery” of mineral springs and their therapeutic potential concealed the fact that many of these sites had been in continuous use for centuries. In some cases, early European settlers first learned of springs from native guides. Many of the “temples of health” to which antebellum Americans flocked each summer were erected on sites sacred to the beliefs and practices of peoples whose “disappearance” from the landscape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries permitted their appropriation and development.⁷²

The spiritual meanings that early Americans attached to thermal and mineral springs were intertwined with their perceptions of this Native American prehistory. In addition to physical sites, Americans often inherited legends and myths they inspired, including accounts of spiritual powers and personages associated with them. A significant dimension of the cultural appropriation of mineral springs in the antebellum world entailed a recuperation and incorporation of the practices and beliefs of their earliest visitors. In light of Reformation anxieties over idolatrous and superstitious abuses of nature and the Protestant campaign against idols in the landscape, one might expect American Protestants to be troubled by the notion of assembling, drinking, and bathing collectively in springs made sacred by the presence of “Manitou” or the “Great Spirit.” Yet, the opposite seems to have been the case. Native American prehistory was enthusiastically, if selectively, appropriated as proof of the efficacy and divine origin of mineral springs. The mythology of Stafford Springs held that “Indians knew of these

⁷¹ Another difference is that, unlike the fierce campaigns waged by European reformers to suppress “superstitious” holy wells and saints’ shrines, there seems to be no American precedent of suppressing access to mineral springs for religious reasons.

⁷² For a history of colonial and early American life from a Native American perspective, see Daniel Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

springs and told the white men of their existence, recommending their medicinal qualities.” Even after European settlement accelerated, Native Americans “resorted to them annually and drank the waters, and bathed in them,” informing the newcomers that “the waters made them feel lively.”⁷³

Conevery Valencius argues that, in Native Americans’ attraction to the power of mineral springs,

American and European observers read an underscoring of the underlying Christian truths toward which even naked savages reached. White migrants created narratives in which native peoples expressed reverence and peace at springs in order to emphasize Indians’ underlying educability and the potential for converting them to worship of the bountiful Creator to whose works they were instinctively drawn.⁷⁴

Of course, what Native Americans lacked was a fuller appreciation of the spiritual source of the springs, knowledge that could not be found in the book of nature alone. Two British evangelicals, visiting America in 1834, observed how Indians had once been drawn to a nearby waterfall, “charmed by the beautiful forms and melodies, they knew not why.”⁷⁵ Christian Europeans and North American “heathen” shared sensory faculties

⁷³ Edward Augustus Kendall, *Travels Through the Northern Parts of United States in the Years 1807 and 1808*, Vol. I (New York: I. Riley, 1809), 6.

⁷⁴ Valencius, *Health of the Country*, 153.

⁷⁵ Reed and Matheson, *A Narrative of the Visit to the American Churches I*, 274–5. See also Reed and Matheson’s account of Kenewa Falls, on pages 201–2: “At my feet the river was dashing down, and lifting up its voice from the deeps beneath to Him who holds the waters in the hollow of his hand. It had done so for ages past; it would do so for ages to come. Here the poor Indian has stood, but will never stand again, thinking he heard in those waters the voice of Deity, and gazing on the face of that orb with wonder, till the spirit of worship was stirred within him.”

and aesthetic predilections, but the latter were deficient in the Christian gospel, which proclaimed what nature, to unregenerate ears, could only murmur.⁷⁶

As the nineteenth century advanced, Americans embellished the mythology of mineral springs. The origin stories were characterized by accidental discoveries and miraculous recoveries. A prototype was the foundation myth of Saratoga Springs, the pre-eminent antebellum northern spa. According to that story, during the 1755 battle with the French at Lake George, the British officer William Johnson suffered a serious leg injury. His Indian allies, sensing his dire condition, carried him to High Rock Spring at Saratoga. After drinking and bathing in the waters for several days, Johnson was miraculously restored to health and walked home unassisted, a distance of thirty miles.⁷⁷

The discovery of Lebanon Springs across the border in Massachusetts bore many similarities to the myth of Saratoga. In this version, it was a different wounded British soldier, James Hitchcock, who was borne in a litter to the springs by faithful Indian guides. Some versions of the tale incorporated a large sycamore at the site that was magically planted when Hitchcock lodged his walking stick in the ground.⁷⁸ These embroidered origin tales were part of a larger cultural response by early Americans to a series of unsettling contemporary realities. Beset by growing pains of rapid urbanization and political and economic transformation and struggling to slough off a sense of

⁷⁶ See Joyce Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, The Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), esp. ch. 8.

⁷⁷ Thomas Chambers points out that Johnson most likely visited not Saratoga Springs but Lebanon Springs, across the Massachusetts border. See Thomas A. Chambers, *Drinking the Waters*, 33–4.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth L. Gebhard, “Canaan—The Land of Promise,” *Americana*, Vol. 6 (New York: National Americana Society, 1911), 304–5.

inferiority beside the vast historical and cultural accomplishments of Europe, Americans appealed to pleasant landscapes and a romanticized Native American past.

For antebellum practitioners, Native American use revealed other powers of the therapeutic landscape. As well as healing bodies and pointing the soul to Christ, mineral springs healed social and communal divisions as well as individual disease, creating a garden of peace that anticipated the millennial earth, where lion would lay down with lamb. When George Engelmann toured the Hot Springs of Arkansas in 1835, only a few Indian families resided in the area, but he invoked their presence and past as evidence of the site's sacredness. The springs, he wrote, had created a "valley of peace, as the red people call it. Even the raw natural man feels himself close to god, and lays his tomahawk down in awe before he enters this place."⁷⁹ Though European settlement was scarcely a few decades old, Engelmann wrote,

We know from the Indians that they treasured and respected these hot springs, and they regarded this as a holy place, where everyone must lay down his weapons, if he did not wish to invoke the wrath of the great spirit; where warring tribes could meet each other in peace, where bloody family feuds could stop for a time, and where often peace and treaties could be made.⁸⁰

Just as the neutral ground of these garden oases could overcome hostilities between warring tribes of Indians, the healing landscape could sooth away sectarian

⁷⁹ Jansma and Jansma, "George Englemann," 157.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 235. Evangelical appraisal of the healing power of nature to overcome hostility between white settlers and Native Americans, and among rival evangelical churches, extended beyond the neutral ground of mineral springs. Mary Howitt described a "gospel tree" in Philadelphia under which early Quaker settlers had made a peace treaty with the Indians. In 1810, the tree was blown down in a storm and a marble monument erected to mark the place, which mentioned that, "While it stood, the Methodists and Baptists held their summer meetings under its shade." Howitt concluded, "It was truly a 'gospel tree.'" Mary Howitt, *A Popular History of the United States of America*, Vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1859), 285.

divisions among Christians. One frequent visitor to Clifton Springs claimed that the “great beauty” of this “religio-health resort” could be found in the “Christian unity which pervades the very atmosphere.” “Sectarian bigotry,” he wrote, like malarial poison, is soon overcome.”⁸¹ Just as the springs could mend the suffering body and point the soul to the fountain overflowing with Christ’s blood, so too they could overwhelm narrow theological prejudice. If the Bible seemed at times to divide Protestants as often as it united them, God’s second scripture could furnish common ground capacious enough to accommodate parties of seemingly intractable theological bent, bridging even the contretemps of Arminians and Calvinists.⁸²

In some cases, the power of the springs to heal sectarian divisions extended even beyond the children of the Reformation. Samuel Adams notes that Clifton Springs opened its doors not only to all varieties of Protestantism but to Catholics as well. One guest noted Clifton’s “prevailing fairness and charity towards different types of belief...from the highest ritualism to the simplicity of the society of Friends” and described seeing “Roman Catholic priests and Bishops” on the grounds who, he claimed, “seemed

⁸¹ McCarty, “Clifton Springs,” 606. William Stringfellow found the environment of White Sulphur Springs similarly conducive to fostering social harmony and cohesion. But rather than deriving from the power of the springs themselves, these ameliorative effects flowed from the “social and refining influences which spring from elegant society.” The trickle-down benefits that came from rubbing shoulders with the socially refined, he wrote, advanced the “benevolent object of the gospel,” of “uniting our race in love.” As a southern slaveholder, Stringfellow was no doubt speaking here of whites. By getting to know one another, the future white leaders of southern society established a “foundation for future confidence and esteem, so essential in all social compacts.” Stringfellow, *The Religious Herald* (Aug. 22, 1850), 1.

⁸² This commitment to ecumenism carried over into Foster’s private life. The devout Methodist married Mary Edwards, great-great-granddaughter of Jonathan Edwards. See Adams, *Life of Henry Foster*, 61.

to appreciate the place and enjoy it.”⁸³ Though it is difficult to establish the factual basis of such claims, they point to a larger hope animating evangelical engagement with therapeutic springs: that any experience of miraculous cure might inspire a similarly miraculous change of heart.

In the deployment of water as a mode of pre-evangelism, the religious economy of the early republic set evangelicals in competition with Roman Catholics. In 1858, a young peasant girl reported visions of the Virgin Mary near Lourdes, a town in southwestern France. Shortly after, she unearthed a spring of holy water in a grotto, and pilgrims began reporting miraculous cures. Protestants rejected both Marian devotion, holy wells, and miraculous cures as idolatry and superstition. Officially, for Protestants, the age of miracles had ended with the apostolic era.⁸⁴ But such opposition did not always stop nineteenth-century Protestants from seeking out miracles where they could be found. Colleen McDannell has uncovered cases of Catholic priests granting Protestants access to bottled water from Lourdes to treat diseases for which no conventional cure was available. Such ecumenicity of practice, while driven by a ministry of benevolence, did

⁸³ Ibid., 146. Alexandra Walsham argues that, despite the best attempts of reformers, Protestants continued to give patronage to holy wells in early modern Britain. She notes that St. Winefride’s Well at Holywell, which failed to make the transition to medicinal spa due to its lack of mineral content, did not stop Protestants from visiting the site in search of healing, even when the site was later redeveloped as a Tridentine shrine. See Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 410.

⁸⁴ On changing Protestant attitudes to miracles in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Bruce Mullins, *Miracles and the Modern Religious Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

not come without strings attached. As McDannell notes, it hid the hope that a cure would help the individual discover the proper spiritual path.⁸⁵

Practical Vitalism: Miracles, Nature's Law, and the Preternatural

The rare and wondrous properties of the waters were not reducible to their therapeutic or social value. The waters seemed to behave strangely. "The water cools very slowly," George Engelmann wrote of the Hot Springs of Arkansas, noting the local residents' belief that it also "heats up more slowly than ordinary water." Born from primordial forces deep in the earth, the springs approached the uncanny, encouraging speculation on their peculiar properties and nature. "The warmth seems to be bound up in the water," Engelmann wrote, "as if it were a part of it."⁸⁶ Like electricity, the "ethereal fire" which many nineteenth-century scientists and writers held to be the spark of life and which was similarly harnessed for its therapeutic powers, mineral waters eluded attempts at comprehension and imitation.⁸⁷ A pamphlet promoting Bethesda Mineral Spring Water of Wisconsin quoted the view of the eminent French internist, Armand Trousseau, that the chalybeate springs "bear little resemblance to natural waters." Chemists, the pamphlet continued, had failed to produce "an imitation identical in action" to naturally occurring waters.⁸⁸ However obedient to nature's laws and chemical analysis, the water's

⁸⁵ Colleen McDannell, "Lourdes Water and American Catholicism," in *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 151.

⁸⁶ Jansma and Jansma, "George Engelmann," 240.

⁸⁷ Cosmological and eschatological speculation on electricity is the focus of the fourth chapter.

⁸⁸ Heath, *Bethesda Mineral Spring Water*, 2.

secretive origins and rare properties seemed to place it in an interstitial zone halfway between nature and nature's God, an emulsion of natural and supernatural elements.

How then did evangelicals account for the revivifying activity of water in and upon the human body? How was divine power enlisted in its miraculous effects? In matters of science, evangelicals tended to value modest claims to knowledge built up slowly through patient observation, often known as the Baconian method. As naturalists, they were cautious to claim full understanding of the precise mechanisms and agencies by which God accomplished remarkable cures through nature. Erastus Root, a Vermont physician trained in divinity at Williams College before his turn to medicine, criticized his colleagues for their tendency to engage in "speculative thesis," rather than humbly toiling to "build up the true" through "patient investigation."⁸⁹ Explaining the origins of disease, he wrote, proved subtler than treatment, so better to leave the former to "superior intelligences" and focus instead on practical diagnosis and the discovery of new therapeutic materials derived from the "three kingdoms of nature."⁹⁰

Nevertheless, practice begged the question. Were nature cures an expression of distant, benevolent design or of a more immediate, felt presence? Were they the result of

⁸⁹ Root quotes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The quote captures the general aversion to "hypothesis" and speculative system that characterized both nature-cure practitioners and early evangelical attitudes to theology (Root, *Inaugural Dissertation*, 6):

But apt the mind or fancy is to rove
Unchecked; and of her roving is no end,
Till warned, or by experience taught she learn,
That not to know at large of things remote
From use, obscure and subtle, but to know,
That which before us lies in daily life,
Is the prime wisdom; what more is fume,
Or emptiness, or fond impertinence.

⁹⁰ Root, *Inaugural Dissertation*, 6.

following “nature’s laws,” of miracles (enlisting supernatural action that violated those laws), or of some intermediary agency? The answers they gave were varied and inconsistent. Broadly speaking, early evangelicals embraced the expansion of powers attributed to nature without diminishing their view of divine sovereignty. Similarly, they embraced chemical analysis of the mineral springs as complementing rather than displacing interpretations of their supernatural origins and significance. While the theological meanings attached to mineral springs were constantly renegotiated, early evangelicals promoted chemical analysis of mineral springs as a means to demonstrate their divine origin.⁹¹ The rhetoric of divine agency slipped easily between special and general providence and a practical vitalism, affirming the natural world, animate and inanimate alike, as driven by a vital force or hidden spiritual agency, one that required negotiation with orthodox conceptions of providence and official Protestant opposition to divine intermediaries.

In the antebellum period, mineral springs possessed a confusing theological and cosmological status. Sometimes they were described as miracles, sometimes as wonders of nature, and sometimes as the expression of natural law. The phrase “wonder of nature” expresses the complexity and contradiction at the heart of the problem. As wonders, mineral springs seemed to bubble up from the muddy middle ground between the

⁹¹ Support for scientific study of the natural world was a common strategy by which evangelicals promoted their beliefs and practices over those of Catholics. For example, the British Presbyterian minister John Cumming claimed that “Popery, of course, does not like light, whether it comes from the mines of geology, or the observatory of the astronomer...or from the word of God.” *God in Science. A Lecture by Rev. John Cumming, D.D., delivered before the Young Men’s Christian Association, in Exeter Hall, Jan. 7, 1851* (New York, 1852), 134–37. Opposition to Catholicism was an important dimension of early evangelical self-identity. See J. Wolffe, “Anti-Catholicism and Evangelical Identity in Britain and the United States, 1830–1860,” in Mark A. Noll, et al., eds., *Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 179–97.

regular, orderly operation of natural laws and the special, supernatural interruption or contravention of those laws, commonly known as miracles. This complexity of classification begins in the Middle Ages, when the therapeutic effects of mineral springs enjoyed a rediscovery in parts of Europe, Italy in particular. As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park have noted, Thomas Aquinas articulated a threefold categorical distinction between natural, preternatural, and supernatural. The natural pertained to an Aristotelian sense of “that which is always or that which is for the most part.” The supernatural pertained to the miraculous, events or phenomena performed directly by God without recourse to secondary causes. The preternatural occupied an intermediate position, consisting of “unusual occurrences that nonetheless depended on secondary causes alone and required no suspension of God’s ordinary providence. Mirabilia belonged to this last category, which was associated with the feeling of wonder.”⁹²

While separate in theory, in daily life the natural and preternatural were often hard to distinguish. Often, the final determination came down to a sense of frequency, the preternatural being considered more rare than the natural. It could be similarly challenging to draw a clear philosophical line between the preternatural and supernatural, since both were by definition rare and inspired feelings of wonder. Aquinas, Daston and Park write, had argued that the preternatural was “wonderful only to the uninstructed, whereas the miraculous is wonderful to all.” The causes of preternatural marvels were simply hidden from our eyes, while truly miraculous phenomena were brought about by the First Cause, which was by its nature incomprehensible.⁹³

⁹² Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 121.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 121–2.

Daston and Park argue that in the medieval and early modern periods, mineral springs were regarded as a preternatural wonder, a “distinct ontological category...suspended between the mundane and miraculous.” During the Hermetic Renaissance, philosophers engaged preternatural forces as part of the “deep structures of the natural world”—“‘spirits’ (in the form of tenuous vapors, both inside and outside the human body); occult qualities; sympathies and antipathies; and the power to shape the external world attributed to the human intellect, celestial intelligences, and, especially, the human imagination.”⁹⁴ By the eighteenth century, natural philosophy, under the influence of Newtonian physics, turned increasingly toward a view of natural order constituted by inviolable, uniform laws. The growth of global travel sapped the saliency of the preternatural as explorers discovered that phenomena that once seemed rare or unusual to Europeans was common in other corners of the world. Nature pursued the same course of operations in Europe and in China, its patterns predictable and consistent. The spectrum of explanation for observable phenomena shrank gradually from three permeable categories to two rigid ones. Miracles and natural law hardened into a binary that left little room for fluid intermediary forces that often escaped direct observation. Increasingly, the preternatural was pushed to the edges of the map. By the late eighteenth century, Daston and Park argue, it was common to affirm that wonders “may occasionally happen, but they occupy no special geographical region, nor can they lay claim to any special ontological status outside the strictly natural. Only a miracle—a divine suspension of natural laws—can in principle break this order.”⁹⁵

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

Erastus Root's analysis of the chemical composition of the Guilford mineral springs points up the ambiguous status of the preternatural in nineteenth-century natural philosophy. Root employed a Baconian approach to the "Materia Medica" of Guilford, describing the geological makeup of area and chemical properties of the water (a mixture of carbonic acid, iron and alumina carbonate, and muriatic acid). He noted the spring's situation in a narrow marsh, how it bubbled up through a bed of clay and a small wooden cask at a constant 48 degree Fahrenheit. From these observable properties, Root suggested that the springs constituted a gift of "beneficent Providence," its properties attributable to natural design. But he also described the springs as miraculous, analogizing this natural wonder of nineteenth-century Vermont to the miracle of the burning bush. "Let it not be said," he wrote, "we will not turn aside to see a great sight, though the bush should burn and not be consumed."⁹⁶ In other words, what God in his beneficence had designed to function according to nature's immutable laws could simultaneously be construed as a miracle.

At times, however, Root's description of Guilford Springs seems to overflow the shallow categorical vessels of natural law and the miraculous. While Root never directly invoke the preternatural, his reflections on the hidden processes driving the springs seemed haunted by traces of the category. Refusing to speculate on what he could not observe directly, the limitations of observation forced him to acknowledge the presence of mystery: "In what manner this spring becomes impregnated with these various substances is a problem which cannot be solved by actual experiment. Nature here works in secret. Within the bowels of the earth a process is carried on, by which decompositions and new

⁹⁶ Root, *Inaugural Dissertation*, 7.

combinations are effected according to the immutable laws of chemical affinity.”⁹⁷ The invocation of “immutable laws” seemed to preclude the category of miracle, a term reserved for rare instances in which the ordinary course of events is broken by divine intervention. It also seemed to preclude the preternatural. In line with emerging scientific consensus, Root made no room for alchemical notions of “magical conjuration” in the bowels of the earth. At the same time, his appeal to secret processes added a spark to the Newtonian mechanism. Nature followed its own path, its subterranean fires inaccessible to observation. His poetic personifications of nature also suggested a more capacious and imaginative space for divine intermediaries. Root seemed to buck against the limitations of his theological and scientific vocabulary, a vocabulary that communicated the constant threat of exiling God from his creation or identifying him too closely with it.

Catharine Beecher, a fellow Congregationalist, offers another example of how evangelical engagement with hydrotherapy retained a whiff of the preternatural. In a letter written in 1849, Catharine Beecher urged her friend Zilpa Grant Banister to come to the Northampton Water Cure to treat her condition of “preternatural mental excitement,” a condition that, she suggested, “if not remedied...will become irretrievable.” She assured Banister that the presiding hydropathic physician, David Ruggles, would not begin her water-cure regimen until convinced that she possessed “vital energy sufficient” to endure the treatment. Ruggles, Beecher continued, possessed “a power in the ends of his fingers in detecting the heat of diseased action—which no physician can approach.”⁹⁸ Beecher’s letter demonstrates that, while many evangelicals

⁹⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁸ Catharine Beecher, letter to Zilpa Grant Banister, 1849: accessed online at <http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/mhc/banister/a/2/491022/01.htm>. Underlining in original.

may have availed themselves of hydrotherapy without much thought to the theories behind them, at least some had a working sense of the vitalist cosmology that informed such treatment—for instance, the belief that human bodies were surrounded by fields of invisible fluid or ether, susceptible to injury and weakness, which skilled practitioners could manipulate and heal through direction of their own superior energetic field—and viewed it as compatible with their theological commitments to providence and divine sovereignty.

A practical vitalism also characterized the writings of William Stringfellow. Writing in *The Religious Herald*, the Baptist minister opined that, so far as men of science were concerned, “where the virtue resides” in Virginia’s healing water, “whether in the saline contents, or in the gases, or in both,” remained “an unsettled question.” This much, however, he offered as practical conjecture: once inside the body, the waters “diffuse, very imperceptibly, a vitalizing influence, which, by degrees, equalizes the circulation—stimulates the secretions—purifies the blood—and restores the healthy functions of all the organs.” Amidst nature’s tendency to entropy and decay, God had provided a “controlling agent” that could vitalize the body’s dissipated and disorganized energies, returning them to an orderly economy: “how impressive,” wrote Stringfellow, “when universal disorder threatens the citadel of life—to realize the goodness of God in providing for us some controlling agent, that can vitalize the sinking energies—re-establish order in the deranged economy, and restore to us again the feelings of health and comfort.”⁹⁹

Beecher’s suggestion of Ruggles’s skill in detecting disease through “a power in the ends of his fingers” suggested an affinity with techniques of animal mesmerism, a topic treated in chapter four.

Edward Hitchcock offered another instance of scientific analysis supporting rather than displacing supernatural explanations. In a lecture on “The Geology and Topography of Palestine and Syria,” delivered to the Amherst Lyceum in March 1843, the naturalist, Congregational clergyman, and president of Amherst College analyzed the chemical properties of the Pool of Siloam, a sample of which he had received from a colleague. He described it prosaically as a “rather powerful mineral water. Taste decidedly acidic.”¹⁰⁰ After breaking down the chemical composition in detail, he clarified that his surveys did not deny the reality of miraculous agency attributed by biblical writers, since it was well known that God employed both miracles and “common agency” (the laws of nature) to carry out his will. In reducing all causality to natural and supernatural causes—or regular and special providence, as earlier Puritan writers would have it—Hitchcock followed a general trend among early nineteenth-century naturalists. However much earlier generations of New Englanders such as Cotton Mather and John Winthrop Jr. may have been willing to trade in the stock of alchemy and hermeticism, by the late eighteenth century the role of intermediary agents was becoming more challenging to define and defend. Older intermediary categories such as the preternatural were increasingly squeezed out by Baconian naturalism and an orthodoxy zealous to push back against any diminution in the traditions of biblical and extrabiblical miracles. Perhaps more than other Protestants, naturalists of a Reformed bent exercised caution in what they said about divine intermediaries, so as not to seem to infringe the sovereignty of a jealous God. Intermediaries, where permitted, were described as secondary means,

⁹⁹ Stringfellow, “Mineral Springs,” 1.

¹⁰⁰ Edward Hitchcock, “The Geology and Topography of Palestine and Syria, Lecture delivered to the Amherst Lyceum,” March 1843, Edward and Orra White Hitchcock Collection, Amherst College Archives, Box 20, folder 8, p. 7.

mechanical extensions of the divine will, rather than as possessing any autonomy in their own right.

At times, however, Hitchcock seemed comfortable making room for intermediary forces. In a lecture to the Massachusetts Home Missionary Society in May 1852, Hitchcock employed the language of chemical analysis to explain how humanity would arrive at the millennium through the work of global missions. Hitchcock differentiated between miracles, in which God intervened directly in the natural order to accomplish his will, and the use of intervening agencies, of which he included the gospel. Analogizing from the natural phenomenon of catalysis (responsible for chemical processes such as fermentation), Hitchcock described a “catalytic power of the gospel” at work in global missions, which, he said, was seeing “multitudes converted, as if by a mysterious influence.”¹⁰¹ This catalytic force, which he chose not to identify directly with the Holy Spirit or the pre-existent Word, operated among human society in secret, after the fashion described in Matthew 13:33. (“The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.”) Like the “decompositions and recompositions” of chemical change, he argued, the spread of Christianity produced the “most extensive changes.” While the coming of the Kingdom of God still relied on a certain amount of direct intervention by God, what Hitchcock called “special divine influence,” for all intents and purposes, the gospel worked on society as a semi-autonomous agent, an occult force or secret improver, restoring all things and moving them toward their proper end.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Edward Hitchcock, *The Catalytic Power of the Gospel: A Discourse Delivered Before the Massachusetts Home Missionary Society...May 25, 1852* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1852), 22.

Where science was loath to speculate, art felt fewer inhibitions. Evangelical poetry furnishes further evidence of the personification of nature and the persistence of occult forces as elements of a practical vitalism animating antebellum evangelical cosmology, a sense of enchantment that escaped the orthodox binaries of providential design and miraculous intervention. Caroline Matilda Thayer, a minor poet and Methodist from Upstate New York, is most remembered for *Religion Recommended to Youth*, a slim volume of advice that included a number of nature poems. Thayer's verse was a favorite of Peter Cartwright. The well-known itinerant bought thirty copies to share among his charges and even claimed to have used the book as currency while bartering for his board on the frontier.¹⁰³ First published in 1817, the book was reissued by the Methodist Book Concern in 1820 and remained a Methodist staple for the next half-century.

"The Mineral Spring," Thayer's ode to Sutton Springs, New York, opens by recasting the creation narrative as a fall from temperance. In the beginning, she writes, there was water—not the formless waste of Genesis but a fountain of life that "every want supplied." With the invention of alcohol, a corruption of water by "noxious gas" and "philogistic fire," humanity was ejected from paradise and discovered disease, pain, and death. Physicians rose to meet the suffering, refining the earth's minerals into a variety of drops and pills. Nature, working in secret, fashioned her own cures. In "subterranean crevices," she combined "unnumber'd salutary ores" until her medications were ready,

¹⁰² For another contemporary discussion of the global spread of the gospel, construed as a unique spiritual agency, see J. W. Alexander, "The Spiritual Vitality of the Truth, Considered in Its Relation to Christian Mission," in *The Christian Souvenir, and Missionary Memorial, for 1851* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1851), 1–12.

¹⁰³ Robert Bray, *Peter Cartwright: Legendary Frontier Preacher* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 128. The book is small, three by five inches: the perfect size, Bray notes, for a circuit rider's saddlebag.

then pushed them out through “many a silver spring.” Thayer mentioned four springs by name—Saratoga, Ballston, Stafford, and Sutton—all of them from northern states.

Sutton, the least famous of the group, received her special devotion for having cured her of consumption as a young woman. “Renovated nature,” she wrote, “smil’d again.”¹⁰⁴

In nineteenth-century poetry as in nature-cure practice, setting was nearly as important as substance. Sutton, situated in a “solitary grove,” issued from a “rock’s infissur’d side,” a double allusion to the rock of Horeb and the side wound of Christ. Sutton flowed in a “crystal tide” that recalled Christ’s sacrificial blood, the “crimson tide” so often invoked in evangelical hymnody. Nature’s intermediary role was clear. Just as Christ interceded for the soul, renovating our spiritual nature, so Nature interceded for the body, repairing the ravages caused by intemperance and disease.

In the remaining verses, Thayer deepened the soteriological parallels through a moral critique of spa culture. Noting a “faint resemblance of redeeming grace,” she observed how the waters were “inviting, open, free to all,” rich and poor alike, the “tatter’d beggar” as much as the “proud belle, who heedless flirted by.” Addressing the “heedless fashionable throng” who “take the pleasant ride, to view the spring, and drink,” she called on them to “think, your souls in ruin lie, Polluted, vile, unfitted for the sky.” In closing, Thayer invited her reader to “drink the living stream, the gushing tide / That flow’d from blest Emmanuel’s bleeding side.”

To the pure Fount of life eternal fly,
Drink, and endure to immortality;
The stream can pristine purity restore;
Drink, and your fainting souls shall thirst no more.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Thayer, *Religion Recommended to Youth*, 116.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

Meditation and contemplation on the renovating powers of nature awakened the soul to its desperate need for divine grace.

Robert Bray argues that the dominant theme of Thayer's nature poetry was to demonstrate how "the Book of Nature reveals God's grand design...without the pantheism of English Romanticism."¹⁰⁶ What Bray does not mention is that the greatest influence on "The Mineral Spring" was the poetry of Erasmus Darwin, a figure who held decidedly unorthodox views of nature's powers. More famous today as the grandfather of Charles Darwin, the elder Darwin was a physician, natural philosopher, and one of the most popular poets of eighteenth-century Britain. In works such as *Zoonomia* and *The Botanic Garden*, Darwin speculated on the origins of life, turning from Newtonian models toward Deism and an emphasis on what P. M. Harman calls "the self-sufficiency of active ethereal powers." As Harman explains, Darwin "applied the theory of active powers inherent in matter to explain the vital force of organisms, deliberately departing from religious orthodoxy." Whereas for Newton, the ether constituted a means for God's direct and orderly action on passive matter, for Darwin, the vital powers of the ether were "self-sufficient to the natural order" and acted "without the exercise of the will of a deity."¹⁰⁷

If Thayer sensed the materialist heresy in his verse, she did not show it. In the opening lines of "The Mineral Spring," she described Darwin as the "glowing genius" whom "bounteous nature chose, her works to scan...And mark, in every plant and opening flower, / Some nice gradation of creative power."¹⁰⁸ Like Darwin, Thayer

¹⁰⁶ Bray, *Peter Cartwright*, 127.

¹⁰⁷ P. M. Harman, *The Culture of Nature in Britain 1680–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 305.

personified and apostrophized nature, positioning it as an intermediary between God and humanity in ways that suggested the potential for autonomy. Bray argues that “Solitude,” another poem from *Religion Recommended to Youth*, similarly transgressed the conventional bounds of natural theology and risked pantheist heterodoxy by reimagining the creation as a semi-autonomous agent or demi-urge that pursued its own purposes and designs.¹⁰⁹ Yet, Thayer’s vitalism was not Darwin’s. Thayer directed the ethers back toward orthodoxy and Christ and away from any sense of nature as a self-sufficient system. Nature’s autonomy remained radically truncated. The visible world in all its forms shadowed invisible realities; nature pointed beyond itself to nature’s God. For the orthodox, the beauty and pleasures of the natural world offered foretastes of heaven rather than a secular surrogate for it.

Conclusion

Despite the widespread popularity of nature cures in antebellum America, evangelical engagement with alternative healing techniques such as hydrotherapy stood apart in at least three respects. First, for evangelicals, the “miraculous” cures often attributed to mineral springs laid bare a deep analogical structure within the cosmos. Time and again, evangelicals appealed to correspondences between the curative virtues of water, pure or mineral, and the cleansing power of Christ’s blood.

¹⁰⁸ Thayer, *Religion Recommended to Youth*, 113. How a minor Methodist poet in upstate New York became a devotee of Erasmus Darwin is an interesting question. A marginal note in “The Mineral Spring” mentions two of Darwin’s earlier works but not *The Temple of Nature*, considered to be his most “atheistic” poem. *Temple*, Harman writes, “echoes the breadth of Lucretius’ argument [in *De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things)*], presenting a version of contemporary materialism as a counterpart to Lucretius’ Epicurean atomism.” Harman, *Culture of Nature*, 282.

¹⁰⁹ Bray, *Peter Cartwright*, 127.

Second, evangelicals were more likely than non-evangelicals to link water-therapy regimes with moral reform efforts such as temperance. This commitment to holistic health—engaging body, mind, and soul—was one reason that they so strongly condemned the “worldly” temptations on display at spas and water-cures. In 1854, James Pleasants warned his daughter Ann, then recovering at a Virginia spring, that “the ‘flesh-pots’ will tempt you from a rigid self-denial and permanent triumph over disease. Forsake, therefore, the pleasures of sin.”¹¹⁰ For Pleasants and Stringfellow, as for northern evangelicals like Henry Foster, full physical vitality was impossible without the spiritual vitality derived from a relationship with Christ and the love of holiness it inspired. As evangelicals failed in their attempts to reform the “dissolute” culture of spa life, they increasingly opted to isolate themselves from fashionable circles or to establish their own separate hotels and treatment facilities.

Finally, evangelicals commonly addressed nature as an intermediary or autonomous force or power, but imposed greater restrictions on that autonomy than other religious groups of the period. For those Americans receptive to the notion of nature’s self-sufficiency in cosmological terms and as a source of spiritual truth, hydropony and other vitalist practices might well have helped to pave the royal road out of orthodox Christianity. A great many others, however, saw fit to authorize hydrotherapeutic ritual as an extension of the new life in Christ. For them, there was no poisoned chalice. Believers could take to the waters without fear, since whatever vitalizing power nature possessed derived ultimately from Christ, the fountain of living water that revived bodies, souls, even the groaning creation itself.

¹¹⁰ Lewis, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 195.

In the decades following the Civil War, hydrotherapy went into a slow decline. The water-cures fared worse than the spas, but even the grand hotels of Saratoga and White Sulphur suffered from shifting public tastes and the arrival of modern medical treatments that could reasonably claim to cure more often than kill. One visitor to Hot Springs, Arkansas in June 1873 noted that the once-constant stream of pilgrims drawn to the waters by the promise of miraculous cures had shrunk to a trickle. As a boy, he wrote, he had often heard stories of “large piles of crutches and old sticks near these springs, left there by invalids who had been cured, and had thrown their crutches and sticks aside, and had gone on their way rejoicing. This may have been so before the rebellion (or the last war between the States),” he continued, “but to-day the crutches and sticks are not seen scattered so profusely around.”¹¹¹

Still, the rare properties of mineral water continued to exercise the American religious imagination into the 1890s and beyond.¹¹² Jane Lippitt Patterson set her late-nineteenth-century novel, *The Romance of the New Bethesda*, at a fictional resort based on Poland Spring. In one scene, Dr. Rossville, a character based on Hiram Ricker, creator of

¹¹¹ Jerrell H. Shofner and William Warren Rogers, “Hot Springs in the ’Seventies,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 22.1 (Spring 1963), 26. The observer, “Lounger,” also noted “a great many peculiarities” about the waters, as George Engelmann had nearly forty years before. For instance, the heat of the waters seemed “quite different from ordinary water that is made hot,” such that one could “place a kettle of this hot water beside a kettle of cold water, on a hot stove, and the cold water will boil first”; it displayed a “marked effect...in aiding parties to overcome and quit the use of tobacco, spirits, opiates, or narcotics of any kind”; and its tendency, while bathing, “to buoy one up,” while making it seem as if the bathers limbs each weighed “a half ton. The limb is very easily brought to the service [sic] of the water, but it seems almost an impossibility to raise it out of the water.”

¹¹² In 1944, L. P. Boylston, the Baptist owner of a mineral spring located near a Baptist church in Blackville, South Carolina, deeded one acre of land to “Almighty God,” for the provision of “the sick and afflicted.” See Joyce S. O’Bannon, *Healing Springs Baptist Church, 1772–1972: 200th Anniversary, October 8, 1972, Blackville, South Carolina Robert R. Reed, Pastor* (Blackville, S.C., 1972).

the famed “Moses” bottle, interrupted an impromptu theological symposium among the guests to ask if any had noticed the unusual bottle under his arm. When a female guest noted its beauty, Rossville chided her. It “means something,” he said. Rossville continued:

This head and face is Moses. Looks just like him. I’ve had a vision, and I know. You remember the children of Israel wanted water, and they clamored so and talked about Egypt, that the old man got a little vexed; and when he smote the rock, he gave it such a mighty clip that it struck clear through. That’s the origin of the New Bethesda: same water that flowed over there when Moses smote the rock. He said *he* did it, you remember; but the Lord told him better than that. No man can bring water out of a rock without help. It is the Lord’s doings, and it is marvellous in our eyes. It was marvellous then, and a good deal more so now. We call the bottle Moses.¹¹³

Patterson’s striking equivalency between the biblical waters of Horeb and those of the New Bethesda (they’re the “same water,” Rossville says), and the claim to divine agency as the source of both, recalled William Stringfellow’s praise for the rare waters of Fauquier White Sulphur Springs forty years earlier. Like Stringfellow, Patterson’s rhetoric similarly masked the constant negotiation and slippage required to reconcile providential notions of the routine operation of natural law with God’s direct, miraculous suspension of those laws. “It was marvellous then,” Patterson wrote, “and a good deal more so now.” Indeed. Patterson’s spring symbolized the opacity that bedeviled attempts to categorize wonders of nature in the twilight of the preternatural—a stubborn, cloudy rivulet bubbling up from the dark cleft separating the natural and the supernatural.

¹¹³ Jane Lippitt Patterson, *The Romance of the New Bethesda* (Boston: Universalist Pub. House, 1888), 90.

Part III: The New Earth

Chapter 4

The Theology of Electricity: Electrotherapy, Mesmerism, and the Science of Heaven

In the 1780s, a mysterious figure called T. Gale began itinerating between Upstate New York and New York City. He favored the spa town of Ballston Pool, where he warned people to stay away from what he called “those debilitating waters,” except for occasional use as a purgative. Gale’s hostility derived from the fact that he promoted a rival therapeutic, one more novel, sensational, and dangerous than mineral water. Gale was an electrotherapist. In 1802, he published *Electricity, or Ethereal Fire, Considered*, the first manual by an American writer on the medical uses of electricity. Employing a portable machine of his own design, he would attach long chains to a subject’s body and then subject it to a series of intense shocks, by which he claimed to be able to cure a wide range of diseases and mental conditions. With regular (and milder) preventative sessions, new outbreaks of disease had been virtually arrested. While he stopped short of promising immortality, Gale suggested that through the “judicious and prudent use of this ethereal fire,” his patients could soon enjoy life spans comparable to those of the biblical patriarchs. As evidence, he cited the example of John Wesley, the Methodist founder and early proponent of the medical benefits of electricity, who lived to the robust age of ninety-eight.¹

If his sales pitch sounded too good to be true, Gale begged his reader to reflect on the singular substance in which he dealt. Recall, he wrote, that electricity is

¹ T. Gale, *Electricity, or Ethereal Fire, Considered* (Troy, N.Y.: Printed by Moffitt & Lyon, 1802), 8.

the very soul of the universe; that it is the accelerating, animating, and all-sustaining principle both of the animate and inanimate creation; that the Author of nature hath endowed it with many exquisite powers, and that, in the artificial improvement of them, it transcends all mineral and vegetable productions of medical specifics, as the soul of the vegetable kingdom transcends the mere fragments thereof.²

Gale's interest in the ethereal fire may have begun with a concern for its practical medical uses, but clearly it did not end there. The wonders of electricity, commonly believed at the time to be a weightless fluid, excited his speculative mind. "This latent, mysterious and powerful agent," he wrote, "pervades all creation, is capable of assuming such a variety of appearances, and of producing such a variety of effects, both in the animate and inanimate creation...I could not pass the importance of its agency in creation, in silence."³ He suggested two audiences for his work: those interested in the immediate, therapeutic benefits of electricity and the more speculative sort, astronomers and natural philosophers, for instance, the kind of people interested in tearing back the veil of nature to peer at the deep structures of creation. "I have unclouded the glory of this inestimable medicine," Gale wrote.⁴ He promised to "unlock the cabinet" of nature's secrets and to offer readers practical and theoretical information on a subject "both novel and occult." He would explain the operation of the ethereal fire "medically, or its artificial use in diseases," "naturally, as the agent of animal and vegetable life," and "astronomically, or as the agent of gravitation and motion."⁵ In the sparks thrown off by

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ *Ibid.*, preface.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, cover.

his homemade device, Gale glimpsed a theory of everything, the source of all life, motion, and direction in the universe.

The antebellum world was awash in a sea of ethers, subtle or “imponderable” (meaning weightless) fluids. Belief in ethers united high and low culture. In elite scientific theory, ethers explained action at a distance, revealing the hidden mechanisms behind phenomena such as light, heat, gravity, magnetism, and electricity. Just as pervasively, popular practices such as mesmerism (or animal magnetism) and spiritualism incorporated variegated forms of an ethereal medium into their cosmology. Gale’s description of electricity as an invisible liquid surrounding and capable of penetrating all matter was a commonplace. The “electrical effluvia,” he wrote, “exists in all places and in all bodies,” “is far more subtle than air, is diffused through all space, surrounds the earth, and pervades every part of it.”⁶

It was common for writers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to ascribe nearly god-like powers to electricity.⁷ Scientific debates in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century centered on the possible role of electricity as the “vital spark” that initiated and sustained all organic life. Natural philosophers linked it to such varied phenomena as heat, light, magnetism, and gravity, as well as catastrophic natural events such as volcanoes and earthquakes. For some, the universal electrical fluid became the

⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁷ On eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates concerning the role of electricity in natural phenomena, including as the “spark” of life itself, see James Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); J. L. Heilbron, *Electricity in the 17th and 18th Centuries: A Study of Early Modern Physics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Linda Simon, *Dark Light: Electricity and Anxiety from the Telegraph to the X-ray* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004); Paolo Bertucci, “Sparks in the Dark: The Attraction of Electricity in the Eighteenth Century,” *Endeavour* 3 (Sept. 31, 2007), 88–93.

right hand of God in creation and destruction, the alpha and omega of the natural world. Gale nearly ran out of adjectives to describe it: “elementary,” “elastic,” “ethereal.” It was, he wrote, the “all-quickening, expanding, vibrating, animating, pervading, sustaining principle of life and motion.”⁸ The same silent force that opened the flower would translate all things from their current fallen frame into a new heaven and new earth.

As James Delbourgo has argued, Gale’s writing on electricity fits into a broader American tradition of “zealous spiritual interpretations of nature,” a tradition that, he writes, “did not simply survive the Enlightenment” but “drew strength from it and flourished long after it.”⁹ This confidence and optimism was widespread in antebellum evangelicalism, especially in Upstate New York, where revivalists such as Charles Grandison Finney worked to create religious states in their subjects that were commonly (and positively) likened to electrification. Such experiences, and the correspondences embedded within them, were read as hopeful signs, prompting some to ponder what deeper purposes God might have behind the imponderable fluid. For Gale, the ethereal fire was a sign of the times, a lively image of the spiritual processes that would purge the material body of corruption and fit it for eternity. “I believe the Millennium is at the door,” he wrote, “and that this ethereal fire will be as conspicuous a mean of purifying the body from disease in that day, as the fire of the spiritual kingdom will be, in purifying the souls of men; and that the publication of this medical treatise, is not without the intention of Heaven.”¹⁰ Electricity lit the way toward a deathless dawn.

This chapter considers how engagement with popular practices that engaged

⁸ Gale, *Electricity*, 94–5.

⁹ Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders*, 128.

¹⁰ Gale, *Electricity*, 68.

“imponderable fluids” fed wide-ranging theological speculation about cosmology and eschatology—the “last things” and the world to come. In contrast to the pattern of previous chapters, this chapter is built around a case study of Edward Hitchcock, the nineteenth-century geologist, Congregational minister, and President of Amherst College. After detailing the development of Newtonian and post-Newtonian conceptions of a universal, imponderable fluid, and tracking the influence of electrical discoveries on accounts of religious experience, I will show how practical attempts to engage and manipulate electrical or magnetic ethers encouraged theological speculation about the first and last things. In Hitchcock’s writing, natural philosophy and piety, practice and speculation, came together to create a theology of electricity.¹¹ In reports by practitioners of novel techniques that claimed to manipulate the electrical fluid—electrotherapy, mesmerism, and spiritualism—he perceived hopeful glimpses of the deep structures of the universe and of the future course of history. Hitchcock believed that orthodoxy must generate a philosophy equal to the appeal of Romantic systems of belief. “The rhapsodies of spiritual pantheism,” he wrote, “must, indeed, be met by metaphysics equally transcendental.”¹² In a trilogy of popular works published in the 1850s, he attempted to construct what he called a “science of heaven,” a grand synthesis of Reformed doctrine, contemporary science, and salvation history.¹³ Encouraged by experiments in animal

¹¹ I borrow the phrase “theology of electricity” from Ernst Benz, *The Theology of Electricity: On the Encounter and Explanation of Theology and Science in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick Publications, 1989). Benz’s work tracks similar developments in an earlier period and in the European context.

¹² Edward Hitchcock, *The Religion of Geology and its Connected Sciences* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Co., 1851), xi.

¹³ Edward Hitchcock, *Religious Truth Illustrated from Science* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Co., 1857), 272.

magnetism conducted by his friend, the Congregational minister Theophilus Packard, Hitchcock announced the luminiferous ether as a “third substance,” halfway between spirit and matter, which would furnish the *prima materia* for the spiritual body at the resurrection and precipitate the dramatic renovations of the physical creation described in the Book of Revelation.¹⁴

Evangelicals routinely denounced “speculative” theology as a road to spiritual ruin, unbelief, and heresy. Like “hypothesis” in science, which referred to opinions hazarded without empirical “facts” to prove them, speculation in theology connoted any doctrinal reflection unmoored from the factual storehouse of scripture.¹⁵ Yet, antebellum evangelicalism exhibited a rich capacity for forging speculative system, particularly when it came to ruminations on the prophecies of the new heaven and new earth. The theology of electricity took many forms and fulfilled a range of functions. While some employed traditional analogical models, pressing them at times to the breaking point, others like Hitchcock moved beyond the limitations imposed by analogy. Building on the claims of mesmerists to have direct sensory perception of spiritual realities, proponents of the electrical theology described the ether as the quintessence of matter, a cosmic hinge that held the natural and supernatural worlds together.

With the exception of John Wesley, evangelicals have been marginal figures in academic histories detailing the early modern culture of electricity. Scholars have tended to focus on natural philosophers and poets, particularly those influenced by the German school of *Naturphilosophie*, for whom the scientific and religious potential suggested by

¹⁴ Hitchcock, *The Religion of Geology*, 398.

¹⁵ On the “beatification of Bacon” by antebellum evangelicals, see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in and Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

electricity paved a pathway to what Charles Taylor has called the “immanent frame,” a move advanced powerfully by deism and accelerated by romanticism, by which a two-story cosmology of nature and the supernatural world is collapsed into a one-story, self-regulating universe.¹⁶ Resisting this move, evangelicals enlisted electricity as an engine of enchantment. Present everywhere, bringing life and motion to all things, the ethereal fire offered a middle way between the mechanistic threat of a distant, impersonal creator and the pantheistic threat of a God entirely identified with the collective internal processes of Nature.

It is challenging to recreate for the contemporary reader a sense of the strange and wondrous possibilities that electricity awakened in the antebellum imagination. For most people in the modern West, electricity is an essential, if largely taken for granted, convenience, a useful instrument that lights our homes and powers our computers and air conditioners. The thought of seeking out physical contact with electricity for illumination, insight, healing, or transformation strikes us as “illicit, even perverse,” James Delbourgo has noted, associated as it is with “electroconvulsive therapy, lightning strikes, electrocution as torture and execution, and unholy experimentation.”¹⁷ Not so in the antebellum world. Intimate contact with electricity provided the felt presence of invisible realities, a presence registered in the fibers of the human body. Such experiences, Delbourgo has written, “opened a path to enlightenment, toward rational understanding and control, yet also to wonder and the unpredictability of strange new experience.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 539–593. On *Naturphilosophie*, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 71–85.

¹⁷ Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders*, 4.

For evangelicals such as Edward Hitchcock, these experiences also provided a window on the last days and the coming kingdom of God, the final destination of the spiritual pilgrim, engaged in a progressive journey from justification to sanctification and final consummation, or from new birth, to new life, to new earth. The theology of electricity promised to penetrate the mysteries of nature and scripture alike, tearing aside the veil to expose the deep structures of time and space, prophecy and cosmos.

But tearing aside the veil of nature invited danger and risk. Electricity could cure as quickly as kill, most dramatically in the lightning bolt.¹⁹ It was the essence of nature, but it was also hidden from common senses, hidden perhaps for good reason. Practices that put people in the path of imponderable fluids opened access to senses and faculties whose reports confounded or contradicted conventional knowledge about the natural world of everyday experience. Reports of the strange states generated by mesmerists and later spiritualists channeling the electromagnetic fluid awakened the ancient specter of enthusiasm and with it, the need to test the spirits to determine from whence they came. Throughout the antebellum period, evangelical engagement with these and other vitalist practices fluctuated as if between the polarities of the electrical current itself—positive and negative, attraction and repulsion, and between practical application and speculative philosophy. The story of Faust, recapitulated for nineteenth-century audiences in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, warned what might befall

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ Almost as famous as Benjamin Franklin's discovery of electricity was Georg Wilhelm Richmann's attempt to confirm it. A Swedish philosopher who lived in St. Petersburg, Richmann was electrocuted while trying to recreate Franklin's experiment of drawing down lightning from inside a building. The incident, which was reported widely, underscored the dangers of experimenting with electricity.

those who sought control of the spark of life and gazed on mysteries not meant for human eyes.

Something in the Air: Ethers and Early Modern Cosmology

Scientific conceptions of ethers date back to the ancient Greeks. In Aristotelian physics, which dominated natural philosophy from the thirteenth century, matter was inherently active, imbued with internal mind-like principles that displayed purposive development. Rather than look for sources of external force, philosophers looked to inner teleology, an orientation overturned by the Newtonian revolution of the seventeenth century. Newton identified a dualistic structure behind all natural phenomena: a passive principle, which he associated with matter, and an active principle, which he associated with God. While Newton had demonstrated the “active principles” or “laws of motion” mathematically, he continued to search for a mechanical explanation of gravity that satisfied him. Privately, he believed that God caused gravitational attraction by his omnipresent activity. Without God, there would be no vital force in the world.²⁰

Newton never arrived at a satisfactory explanation of the mechanics of gravity. But in the final section of his *Opticks* (1717), he suggested the divine function of a universal, imponderable ether—an invisible, tasteless and weightless fluid too subtle to be detected through empirical observation and measurement: “God, being present everywhere by His will, moves all bodies in His infinite, uniform *sensorium*, and so shapes

²⁰ Gary Deason, “Reformation Theology and the Rise of Mechanistic Conception of Nature,” in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 185.

and reshapes according to His pleasure all parts of the universe,” he wrote.²¹ Newton, who held to an alchemical correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, believed those “parts” included human anatomy no less than the heavens. The same ethereal fluid that pushed the planets also filled the nerves and the brain of the human body. The faculty of the will sent vibrations through the ether, which, directed down particular pathways of nerves, caused muscles to contract. In every sphere, small or great, the Protestant God was sovereign.²²

If Newton was content to offer only the roughest sketch of the universal ether, others rushed to fill the void. The sheer variety of models was breathtaking, especially given the range of theological and scientific commitments that informed them.²³ At bottom, however, ethers were either mechanistic or animate. Mechanistic models of the ether, such as Newton’s, attempted to account for motion in the universe by proposing a physical medium that distributed force. Animate ethers, on the other hand, proposed a role for ethers as the animating power behind all organic life and growth in the animal and vegetable kingdoms. A particularly influential example of the latter appeared in Bishop Berkeley’s *Siris* (1744). Berkeley argued that an animate ether, identifiable with the phenomena of light and fire, projected divine presence as “the vegetative soul or vital spirit of the world”—a notion that drew on a range of sources, including the spiritualized

²¹ Cited in G. N. Cantor, “The Theological Significance of Ethers,” in G. N. Cantor and M. J. S. Hodge, eds., *Conceptions of Ether: Studies in the History of Ether Theories, 1740–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 148.

²² *Ibid.*, 145.

²³ On the development of ether theories from the ancient to the modern world, see Cantor and Hodge, *Conceptions of Ether*; E. T. Whittaker, *A History of the Theories of Aether and Electricity: From the Age of Descartes to the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1910).

ethers presented in Hermetic writings and ancient Greek and Egyptian thought.²⁴ Even more ambitious, a third class of ether theories sought to reconcile the animating functions of the ether with its mechanistic utility in a billiard-ball universe.²⁵

In the eighteenth century, conceptions of the universal ether became closely associated with electricity. As A. J. Kuhn has written, “The mysterious ‘electrical fluid fire’ seemed to answer all the requisites for the primary agent which reconciled spiritual causes and mechanical effects acting immediately under the First Cause. Learned speculation on fire as the element of elements...together with the tradition of mystical or alchemical fire, converged to support all sorts of hypotheses on the first’ philosophy.”²⁶

The British natural philosopher and early electrotherapist Richard Lovett, who identified the ether with fire and electricity, was typical in his appeal to ether as the principal secondary cause by which God accomplished the ordinary operations of the universe. Lovett wrote that

though God alone is the Author and Preserver of all Things, and which he continually upholds with his immediate Hand; yet, the only instrumental Cause of our Being is this subtil Spirit.... In a word, this pure Aether or Fire, contain’d in Air, is the Cause of all Motion, animal and vegetable.²⁷

²⁴ Cantor, “Theological Significance of Ethers,” 147–8.

²⁵ See, for instance, the work of Andrew Michael Ramsay (1686–1743), a Scottish Jacobite exile living in Paris and devotee of Madame Guyon. John L. Brooke writes that Ramsay’s *Travels of Cyrus* and *Philosophical Principles* connected hermetic thought to “Judeo-Christian revelation and Newton’s concept (abandoned by mechanical rationalists) of a divine ‘pure aether,’ an ‘exceedingly subtle SPIRIT’ that governed the workings of the natural world.” John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 95.

²⁶ A. J. Kuhn, “Nature Spiritualized: Aspects of Anti-Newtonianism,” *English Literary History* 41 (Autumn 1974), 408.

²⁷ R. Lovett, *That subtil medium prov’d; or that wonderful power of nature so long ago conjectur’d by the most ancient and remarkable philosophers, which they call’d aether but oftener elementary fire, verify’d* (London, 1756), 64–5. Cited in Cantor, 137.

Ethers presented opportunities for philosophers of all religious commitments and none. Mechanical ethers, while offering a means of further illustrating God's sustaining care for the creation through the orderly operations of the universe, could be easily turned (and were) to materialist purposes, providing an efficient cause for all physical motion, a system that seemed to place the creator at a too-great a distance from the creation. If some ethers threatened to allow too little divine presence in nature, others suggested too much. Animate ethers brought with them the potential to collapse a two-story universe into one story, a possibility that contrasted with scriptural accounts of a transcendent, all-powerful God.

As should perhaps be clear, ether theories were appropriated not only for their scientific explanatory power but also for how they helped to solve theological problems, particularly those involving the relationship between natural universe and supernatural forces, and between the soul and the body.²⁸ The doctrine of dualism—the notion that all of reality is composed of two substances, matter and mind—lay in the background of debates concerning the possible presence of mysterious ethers in the universe. While matter and spirit for dualists were irreducible substances, they nevertheless had constant need to interact with one another. To solve this conceptual problem, dualists often employed the notion of an ethereal fluid mediating between the material and spiritual worlds. Spirit and matter could be conjoined by the ministrations of a unique substance that shared the properties of both.

²⁸ Cantor, "Theological Significance of Ethers," 145. Cantor argues that ethers were used in four main problem areas: in natural theology, to address cosmological functions, to account for all motion and activity in the universe, and as intermediaries between God and the universe or, analogically, between mind/spirit and matter. Cantor's article, which focuses on British works that advocated ethereal fluids between 1810 and 1875, is one of the few scholarly attempts to gauge the theological functions of ethers.

“Almost the Deity of Nature”: Ether and the Limits of Analogy

The experiments with electricity conducted by Benjamin Franklin and others excited wide-ranging reaction in mid-eighteenth-century culture. Among evangelicals in particular, responses ranged from the practical to the more speculative in nature. On the more practical end, we find a figure such as John Wesley. Wesley’s central concern with electricity was how to harness it to reduce the suffering of humanity. Convinced of its medical potential, he purchased four “electrical machines” and made them available to the poor of London. Theory, however, interested him little. In *The Desideratum: or Electricity Made Plain and Useful* (1760), Wesley went to great length describing the therapeutic value of electric current, detailing the diseases and conditions to which it might be applied. In the preface, he confessed, “Indeed, I am not greatly concerned for the philosophical part, whether it stand or fall. Of the facts we are absolutely assured. . . . But who can be assured of this or that hypothesis, by which he endeavours to account for these facts?”²⁹ In 1768, after reading Joseph Priestley’s work on electricity, Wesley again expressed wariness of speculative cosmology. While describing it as “ingenious,” he wondered as how much remained mystery. So long as Christians stuck with the observable cures demonstrated by electricity—“a thousand medicines in one”—one was on solid ground. “But if we aim at theory, we know nothing,” he wrote. “We are soon ‘lost and bewildered in the fruitless search.’”³⁰

²⁹ Quoted in Robert E. Schofield, “John Wesley and Science in 18th-Century England,” *Isis* 44.4 (Dec. 1953), 335. On John Wesley’s engagement with the therapeutic uses of electricity, see Paolo Bertucci, “Revealing Sparks: John Wesley and the Religious Utility of Electrical Healing,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 39 (2006), 341–362.

Yet, Wesley was no pure pragmatist. Like other early evangelical leaders, he hankered after a natural philosophy that allowed a more intimate, personal God than that deism allowed. This search inspired his opposition to the Newtonian view of providence, which to his mind, limited divine action to the preservation of the creation. While Wesley opposed the mystical analogies of William Law and Jacob Boehme, he flirted with the anti-Newtonian philosophy of John Hutchinson for more than thirty years—an extension of his lifelong interest in attempts by physico-theology to reconcile grace and nature.³¹

For other evangelicals, practical exposure to electricity spurred speculation on the mystical and mechanical agency of the ethereal fire. In contrast to Wesley's tone of restraint and equivocation, the early American electrotherapist T. Gale pressed the analogy between the spiritual causes and mechanical agencies and effects.

Complimenting the Moravian leader Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf for promoting the analogy between the sun and the Holy Spirit, he wrote that the ethereal fire appeared

almost the Deity of nature. Was it not a mysterious instinct, that led so many of the untutored tribes of the earth, to pay divine honours to the sun, and even to fire, in some instances, as being of the same species? The sun appears to be, in the natural world, what God is in the spiritual; there

³⁰ Schofield, "Wesley and Science," 336. In his journal for October 16, 1747, John Wesley wrote, "How must these [experiments with electricity] also confound those poor half-thinkers, who will believe nothing but what they can comprehend? Who can comprehend, how fire lives in water, and passes through it more freely than through air? How flame issues out of my finger, real flame, such as sets fire to spirits of wine? How these, and many more as strange phenomena, arise from the turning round a glass globe? It is all mystery." John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, Vol. 3 (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1835), 409.

³¹ On John Wesley's on-and-off interest in Hutchinsonianism, see A. J. Kuhn, "Nature Spiritualized." On Hutchinson's system more generally, see G. N. Cantor, "Revelation and the Cyclical Cosmos of John Hutchinson," in L. J. Jordanova and Roy Porter, eds., *Images of the Earth: Essays in the History of the Environmental Sciences* (Chalfont St. Giles: British Society for the History of Science, 1979), 3–22; John C. English, "John Hutchinson's Critique of Newtonian Heterodoxy," *Church History* 68.3 (Sept. 1999), 581–597.

seems to be a striking analogy existing between the natural and spiritual world.³²

At what point did admiration become worship? At what point did analogy break down and collapse into identification? For evangelicals, the analogical method relied on difference as much as similarity, absence as well as presence. Gale's "almost" became a fulcrum between orthodoxy and heresy, desire and consummation, true and false worship. Evangelical critics of the analogical method pointed out the dangers of the method. Leonard Woods Jr., professor of theology at Andover Theological Seminary in Newton, Massachusetts, lectured his charges on the "Dangers to be Avoided in Analogical Reasoning": "whenever analogical reasoning proceeds on the supposition of a *strict* analogy between the attributes and operations of God...and those of the material or animal world," wrote Woods, "then errors of one kind or another are sure to be the consequences."³³

Not one for equivocation, Gale embarked on analogical flights typical of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural theology.³⁴ Gale may well have been familiar with Richard Barton's *The Analogy of Divine Wisdom* (1750), in which Barton analogized

The infinite divine Spirit or HOLY GHOST, and the UNIVERSAL AETHER or elemental Fire.... Because as the mechanic philosophers make the Aether the cause of attraction, muscular motion and other

³² Gale, *Electricity*, 65.

³³ Quoted in Herbert Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America, 1800–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 43. For a contemporary evangelical defense of the analogical method, see Francis Wayland, *A Discourse on the Philosophy of Analogy: delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Rhode Island, September 7, 1831* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little and Wilkins, 1831).

³⁴ On eighteenth-century developments in the use of analogy, see Earl R. Wasserman, "Nature Moralized: The Divine Analogy in the Eighteenth Century," *English Literary History* 20.1 (March 1953), 39–76.

extraordinary phaenomena of matter: So is the HOLY GHOST the cause of all spiritual conduct, which is consonant to the divine Law.³⁵

Whether Gale was familiar with Barton's work, his influences were certainly eclectic. In addition to his acknowledged debt to Wesley and Zinzendorf, Gale drew on *Studies of Nature* (1784) by French naturalist Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1737–1814), a work influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. James Delbourgo also suggests the possible influence of Jakob Boehme, John Hutchinson, Bishop George Berkeley, Immanuel Swedenborg, and a range of Hermetic philosophers and Freemasons.³⁶

Even the limitations of analogy were occasion to make theological hay. Gale conceded that the correspondence between the spiritual and ethereal fire foundered on human sin. While no animal or vegetable life could exist without participation in the life of the natural sun, human souls were inclined to prefer darkness to spiritual light, a fact he took to demonstrate innate human depravity and the necessity of conversion in Christ. Just as there is “no animation in the natural world, but by a participation in the ethereal fire,” he wrote, “so it is in the spiritual world, ‘except a man be born again, or except he be baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire (see the analogy) ye cannot see the

³⁵ Richard Barton, *The analogy of divine wisdom: in the material, sensitive, moral, civil, and spiritual system of things, in eight parts* (Dublin: Printed for the author, and sold by George and Alexander Ewing, 1750). Quoted in Cantor, “Theological Significance of Ethers,” 149. While Delbourgo does not cite Barton among the possible influences on Gale's work, this seems more than plausible, given Barton's analogical emphasis.

³⁶ Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders*, 217. While the question of influence must remain unsettled so long as Gale's identity remains a mystery, scholarship on the religious culture of the burned-over district, particularly works dealing with the cosmology of Joseph Smith and early Mormonism, has revealed the pervasiveness of hermetic and other occult traditions. See John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1998).

kingdom of God.”³⁷ For all his eclecticism and analogical excess, on major doctrinal issues, Gale remained tethered to a sublunar orthodox orbit.

Gale’s theology of electricity captures a number of features of early evangelical engagement with the ethereal fire. First, his interest in electricity began with a concern for practical utility and moved out into broader explorations in speculative theology and cosmology. He made extensive use of the logic of analogy, spiritualizing electricity as analogous to the Holy Spirit or Christ.³⁸ Finally, Gale harnessed electricity potential for eschatology, the study of the “last things.” Electricity grounded a metaphysics that unified all knowledge into one grand science capable of refuting skeptics and of providing believers a foretaste of the resurrection and kingdom of God, connecting them with the life force itself.

[W]e hail thee, adorable ELECTRICITY! late arrived, or lately known,
the friend of human life—with celestial blessings surcharged, of late
descended from on high, to bid the dying live, the sick revive, the pain’d to
rest in ease, the blind to see, the lamb be whole—to lead man on to
lengthen’d age in ease—to be the sister blessing of that grace, destined in
due time to fill all hearts, and reign triumphant through our disordered
world.³⁹

Conversion and Cosmology

In his journal for February 17, 1753, John Wesley summarized what he had learned of electricity from reading the letters of Benjamin Franklin. He wrote,

³⁷ Gale, *Electricity*, 67. Little is known with certainty about Gale’s identity or background. James Delbourgo has argued that he may have been a Baptist, based on the fact that Gale’s Troy, New York, publishers, Moffitt and Lyon, published “a number of Baptist and millennial tracts in the same period by writers like Benjamin Gorton and Elias Lee.” Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders*, 218. I argue here that, on major doctrinal issues, Gale seems to fit the parameters of antebellum revivalism.

³⁸ On the analogical method and its popularity among evangelicals, see chapters 2 and 3.

³⁹ Gale, *Electricity*, 216.

From Dr. Franklin's *Letters*, I learned (1) that electric fire (ether) is a species of fire, is finer than any yet known; (2) that it is diffused, and in nearly equal proportions, through almost all substances; (3) that, as long as it is thus diffused, it has no discernible effect; (4) that if any quantity of it be collected together, whether by art or nature, it then becomes visible in the form of fire, and inexpressibly powerful.⁴⁰

From the description, one can imagine how easily it was to spiritualize this great force of nature. For the proponents of revival in Europe and America still digesting the portents of the Protestant Evangelical Awakening, one could hardly imagine a more fitting analogy for the agency behind the dramatic mass conversions from Salzburg to Northampton. Franklin's description of the electrical fire as "never visible but when in motion, and leaping from body to body," could have easily been applied to the action of the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion.⁴¹

In short order it was. In a diary entry from June 7, 1790, William McKendree, who lived in Tennessee and later became a bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church, described feeling a spiritual presence that "made cold chills run over me" and "waked all my interlectual [*sic*] powers to attention." Following the encounter, he continued, "my sp[iri]it fluttered, my heart beat—all my powers was a wake [*sic*] and Selistial [*sic*] fire ran through ever [*sic*] power of my body."⁴² Benjamin Abbott described an experience of spiritual electrification as he lay on the floor for half an hour, "the power of God running through every part of my soul and body, like fire consuming the inward corruptions of

⁴⁰ John Wesley, *Works*, 547.

⁴¹ Cited in Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders*, 11.

⁴² Quoted in Ruth Alden Doan, "Worship, Experience, and the Creation of Methodist Place," in James D. Bratt, ed., *By the Vision of Another World: Worship in American History* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 42.

fallen, depraved nature.”⁴³ During the Cane Ridge revivals of 1801, Peter Cartwright heard the voice of God and “a feeling of relief immediately flashed over me as quick as an electric shock.”⁴⁴ Colonel Robert Patterson, another participant in the revivals on the Kentucky frontier, described the effects of the Holy Spirit on thousands of men and women “instantaneously laid motionless on the ground” in language that paralleled T. Gale’s vivid accounts of his patients’ response to electrotherapy:

Some feel the approaching symptoms by being under deep convictions; their heart swells, their nerves relax, and in an instant they become motionless and speechless, but generally retain their senses. It comes upon others like an electric shock, as if felt in the great arteries of the arms or thighs; closes quick into the heart, which swells, like to burst. The body relaxes and falls motionless; the hands and feet become cold, and yet the pulse is as formerly, though sometimes rather slow. Some grow weak, so as not to be able to stand, but do not lose their speech altogether.⁴⁵

Perhaps the most famous literary conversion of the nineteenth century, that of Charles Grandison Finney, employed electrification as a central metaphor for the new birth. He was sitting beside the fire, Finney later wrote, when suddenly

the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed, it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love, for I could not express it in any other way. It seemed like the very breath of God. I can recollect distinctly that it seemed to fan me like immense wings. These waves came over me, and over me, and over me, one after the other, until I recollect I cried out, “I

⁴³ Benjamin Abbott, *The Experience, and Gospel Labours, of the Rev. Benjamin Abbott* (New York: Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, 1813), 45. Baptist preacher John Taylor described attending an outdoor meeting and coming suddenly under conviction, “with as much sensibility as an electric shock could be felt.” John Taylor, *A History of Ten Baptist Churches* (Frankfort, Ky.: J. H. Holeman, 1823), 16–17.

⁴⁴ Robert Patterson, “Letter to the Rev. Dr. John King,” Sept. 25, 1801, in H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, eds., *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1960), I: 568.

⁴⁵ Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1857), 35.

shall die if these waves continue to pass over me.” I said, “Lord, I cannot bear any more;” yet I had no fear of death.⁴⁶

The popularity of Finney’s “new methods” of revivalism, which promoted a view of revivals as orderly products of human effort rather than as spontaneous divine intervention, demonstrates how the same sense of confidence animating the expansion of human control over the mysterious forces of electricity represented by inventions such as the electric telegraph mirrored the new sense of control over the direction of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Promethean power of the thunderbolt had been harnessed by Franklin and Morse, the spiritual charge felt by converts in the moment of awakening could be channeled by a skilled revivalists. In a letter to Finney on November 17, 1830, the itinerant William Clark claimed to be “the recipient and channel of a sensible divine emanation, which he caused to pass from him by a perceptible influence, as electricity passes from one body to another.”⁴⁷

While Colonel Robert Patterson had no difficulty mixing the terminology of electrification and spiritual conversion, for others, such similarities were used to deny the authenticity of religious experience, by discounting bodily jerks and convulsions as the overripe fruit of nervous disorder or other materialist causes. Valentine Rathbun, a Baptist minister in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, was initially attracted to the Shakers. When he later turned against them, he dismissed the “very extraordinary and uncommon power” of Shaker conversions by comparing them to the effects of electric shock. As he described it,

⁴⁶ Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Reverend Charles G. Finney, Written By Himself* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1876), 20.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1982), 78.

A strange power begins to come on, and takes place in the body, or human frame, which sets the person agaping and stretching; and soon sets him a twitching, as though his nerves were all in a convulsion. I can compare it to nothing nearer its feeling than the operations of an electerising *machine*: the person *believes* it is the power of God, and therefore dare not resist, but wholly gives way to it.⁴⁸

Such efforts to link electricity with materialism did little to dampen the antebellum imagination. At times, evangelical speculation on the “first philosophy” could verge on the cabbalistic. Alexander Campbell, writing in *The Christian Messenger and Family Magazine*, described how the Genesis narrative of creation, light was formed first because “in light, associated with heat, as expressed in the Hebrew AUR, is the vital principle of animated nature. After light [came] the ethereal, as essential to the separation of the various creations, as well as to life; probably itself the effect of the electric principle associated with light.”⁴⁹ In the attempt to reconcile all spiritual causes and mechanical effects, Campbell recast traditional conceptions of hermetic or alchemical notions of fire and light to cohere with both Hebraic etymology and contemporary natural philosophy.

As a form of spiritual matter, electricity furnished evangelical cosmology with an intermediary force of nature that communicated divine omnipresence and omnipotence. Writing in *The Millennial Harbinger*, W. T. Moore, a graduating student from Bethany College in Bethany, Virginia, described the universe as a stairway ascending from matter to spirit, reviving the ancient notion of the Great Chain of Being. Climbing from the lower rungs of minerals, water, and air, to the powers of “Chemical Affinity” and the “unseen hands” of gravitational attraction, Moore arrived at length at electricity, a place

⁴⁸ Valentine Rathbun, *An Account of the Matter, Form, and Manner of a New and Strange Religion* (Providence: Printed and sold by Bennett Wheeler, 1781); quoted in Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders*, 159. Italics in original.

⁴⁹ Alexander Campbell, “Family Culture: Conversations at the Carlton House,” *The Christian Messenger and Family Magazine* 1.1 (May 1845), 15.

that marked “the end of materiality.” He wrote, “Here dwells, in silent security, that incomprehensible mystery,” a power “so far removed from the sensuous that it becomes almost Spiritual, if not entirely so.” Electricity, he continued, was “the balance wheel in the machinery of Creation,” the neck in the hourglass, a switching station between matter and spirit that preserved the separation required in a dualistic universe while facilitating a constant back and forth flow between them. “Here the Material and Spiritual universes approach near to each other, if, indeed, it is not the point at which they meet,” he wrote.⁵⁰

But the electrical ether was more than a bridge. Partaking of the essences of both worlds, this spiritual form of matter bound the whole together by penetrating every corner of the visible and invisible worlds. The “mighty power of this imponderable agent,” Moore continued, “permeates every thing in the boundless realms of Nature.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ W. T. Moore, “The Visible and the Invisible,” *The Millennial Harbinger* Series 5, Vol. 1, no. 6 (June 1858): 314–316. For a later example of the analogy of electricity and the Holy Spirit, see John Franklin Graff, *“Graybeard’s” Lay Sermons* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1877). In “The Tri-Personality of God as Symbolized in His Works,” Graff, a Philadelphian author and early dispensational premillennialist, argued that the three persons of the Trinity are symbolized in the three natural elements of gravity (Father as “originator of all things”), light (Son as “elaborator of all things,” and electricity (Holy Spirit as “consummator of all things”). “We feel Electricity as an invisible agent of irresistible power,” Graff wrote (61).

⁵¹ Moore, “The Visible and the Invisible,” 314–316. Moore further argued that the occult nature of the electrical force offered a model for human morality, teaching values of humility and restraint. In the great “stairway” of being, he wrote, power and being increased as physicality and sensation decreased. In scripture, which he described as a “telegraphic dispatch” from the invisible world, divine power is normally evoked by dramatic natural phenomena such as the storm, earthquake, or volcano. Yet, such “freak” disturbances, he wrote, are but “bleedings from the wound the power has received that moves beneath.” Following the rule that spiritual power increases in inverse proportion to its sensibility, Moore argued that the power behind a comet (“scattering its sparks of electricity across the heavens”) pales in comparison to the silent force exerted in “the opening of the flower.” Christians, he concluded, were to imitate this example through moral restraint and discipline, so that “all our workings for good, be not like the

Here one could easily get into trouble. Theological interest in the vitalizing powers of the electrical fluid carried on from older traditions in mysticism, alchemy, and neo-Platonic philosophy, which built on the notion of the “inner light,” the *imago dei* or divine signature, which through a variety of philosophical routes, became diffused more generally throughout the creation itself. The most common way to head off the charge of an extreme or undialectical conception of divine immanence was to identify this light with the person of Christ. One early nineteenth-century evangelical poet did just this, linking the incarnation with the vital principle behind life and motion in the universe. “God in Christ: A Sacred Ode,” harmonized the mystical notion of the “vital flame” with Newtonian conceptions of natural law and orderly regulation.

Creator of yon vast expanse,
Where planets trace their mazy dance;
Enkindler of the vital flame
Which animates the human frame,
Maker of ev’ry beast that moves,
Of ev’ry bird the air that roves,
And fish that in the ocean play,
And insects in the solar ray [...]
Or all-pervading quick’ning soul
Which moves and regulates the whole!⁵²

Imagining Christ as a kind of global soul would always run the risk of conflating spiritual causes and mechanical agencies. Conceptions of Christ’s abiding presence in the world through the Holy Spirit, however all-pervading, could not become coextensive with it. The evangelical cosmos remained a two-story house.

But if the divine dialectic of immanence and transcendence could not be

crackling of electricity upon the [Leiden] jar, but as it silently permeates every circle of nature and gives life and beauty to all created things.”

⁵² “God in Christ: A Sacred Ode,” *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, Vol. 13 (London: T. Williams and Co, 1805), 479. The poem is attributed to “E. H.”

relinquished, evangelicals found a temporary solution in the promise that Christ revealed the true face of God. Ultimately, love vanquishes fear, life defeats death, because the law was fulfilled in Christ's sacrifice. The poet continued:

Justice relents, and yields to Grace [...]
No more on Sinai's awful brow
The thunders roll and lightnings glow;
No more the vengeful fiery flood
Precedes the angry frowning God; [...]
No; Jesus' blood has quench'd the flame,
And spoke the tempest into peace.⁵³

The collision of metaphors, though somewhat awkward, is striking: the flood of divine wrath is overwhelmed and subdued by a second flood, the outpouring of Christ's blood. The verse points up a pervasive theme in the cosmological function of the ethereal fire: its double nature. The "vital flame" that creates and sustains the animate and inanimate creation is one face of the divine agency that also that threatens at each moment to kindle into a "vengeful fiery flame" that will swallow up all things and bringing the world to an end.

To put it another way, for evangelicals, the attributes of God revealed by electricity were decidedly forked. John Wesley believed that the healing sparks generated by his electrotherapy device revealed divine benevolence. But Wesley, who was surely aware that Franklin's conception of the electrical fluid linked earthquakes, thunderstorms and lightning, and volcanic eruptions with the "vivid matter released by electrical machines," also declared in traditional fashion that "Thunder, lightning, storms,

⁵³ Ibid.

earthquakes, and volcanoes shew the terror of his wrath.”⁵⁴ As Paolo Bertucci writes, “Janus-like, electricity could either heal or bring destruction.”⁵⁵

Death and Apocalypse

The double nature of fire weaves in and out of the Christian scriptures. In the Old Testament, God first speaks to Moses from a bush that burns without being consumed. In Matthew’s gospel, Christ baptizes with fire and the Holy Spirit, while the Book of Acts, describes the Holy Spirit’s descent upon the disciples as taking the form of fiery tongues.⁵⁶ But if the scriptures depicted God blessing and baptizing his people with fire, an equal number of stories linked the agency of fire with divine wrath. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed when fire and brimstone hailed down from the heavens. The Book of Deuteronomy warned that “the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.”⁵⁷ In the immediate aftermath of the Great Flood, when God promised Noah that he would never again punish the earth with water, he followed up by saying it would be the fire next time. In 2 Peter, the prophecy is elaborated, with the future earth described melting in fervent heat.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Quoted in Bertucci, “Revealing Sparks,” 360.

⁵⁵ Bertucci, “Revealing Sparks,” 361.

⁵⁶ Matthew 3:11: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. But he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire”; Acts 2:3: “And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.”

⁵⁷ Deuteronomy 4:24.

⁵⁸ 2 Peter 3:10: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”

Cosmology fed eschatology in subtle and powerful ways. The belief in the presence of a dormant fire in all things waiting to be kindled gave the stable order of creation a dose of the precarious. J. F. Martinet's *The Catechism of Nature* (1793) was typical in instructing children to regard fire as an element that "lies hid in almost every thing...there it remains in a state of rest—but when it is brought out of its resting-place, it spreads itself among fuel, whether of wood or coals."⁵⁹ Just as God, the preserver of all things, held back the waters of the earth to prevent a second deluge, so he restrained the elemental fire. But the moment he lifted his restraining hand, all would be consumed.

Philosophical theory informed and was supported by religious experience. Benjamin Abbot, a Methodist itinerant to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland, described seeing "a ball of fire...about as large as a small pot" fall from the sky while aboard a ship from England to America. From this experience, he gleaned two facts about the nature of reality: first, that "fire was contained in every thing," and second, "that there was a dreadful hell beyond our comprehension."⁶⁰ Through contemplation of the dormant, constitutive element of fire surrounding and penetrating the natural world, Abbot received proof of the existence of the spiritual world and was awakened to the reality of eternal punishment. In his fearful vision of the present reality and future destiny of the earth, the last days would be ushered in by the spontaneous emergence of fire from

⁵⁹ J. F. Martinet, *The Catechism of Nature* (Boston: Printed by Young and Etheridge, 1793), 58–9. On the American publishing history of this work, see chapter two.

⁶⁰ Benjamin Abbott, *The Experience, and Gospel Labours, of the Rev. Benjamin Abbott* (New York: Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, 1813), 11. A later edition of Abbott's biography, published by T. Mason and G. Lane in 1836, excised this story, suggesting a growing sensitivity in Methodism to the enthusiastic potential of visionary experiences. For another example of a vision of nature manifesting latent fire (as discussed in chapter one), see William Glendinning, *The Life of William Glendinning, Preacher of the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1795), 3–4.

the very molecules of the creation.

For evangelicals, contemplation of death was frequently connected with contemplation of the end of the world. While such linkages could verge on solipsism, evangelical theology, whose God had his eye on every sparrow, encouraged believers to forge creative link between smaller and greater worlds, to work the weft of the spiritual autobiography with the warp of the grand biblical narrative of redemption. When B. Hicks, a Baptist minister from South Carolina, wrote a hymn as he lay near death with fever, he judged it acceptable practice to hasten from a consideration of his own imminent death to the appearance of the Antichrist:

The time is swiftly rolling on
 When I must fain and die;
My body to the dust return,
 And there forgotten lie.

Let persecution rage around,
 And Antichrist appear;
My silent dust beneath the ground;
 There's no disturbance there.⁶¹

Just as often it worked in reverse. Contemplation of the last days awakened the soul to thoughts of mortality. Revival hymns expressed the full stock of apocalyptic imagery, especially those involving the dissolution of nature: stars falling from the sky, the sun turning black as sackcloth and the moon turning to blood, earthquakes that bring down the mountains and jolt every island out of its place. “The Harvest Hymn,” for instance, encouraged singers to “Come then, O my soul and think on that day, / When all things in nature shall cease and decay”:

'Twill all be in vain the mountains must flee,
The rocks fly like hail stones, and shall no more be;

⁶¹ William Walker, *The Southern Harmony, and Musical Companion* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 19.

The earth it shall shake, the seas shall retire,
And this solid world will then be all on fire.⁶²

The sympathetic web of correspondence connecting the human body and the cosmos was repeated in the language evangelicals used to describe the descent of the Holy Spirit during revival and the latter-day immolation of the earth. As the private soul enjoyed a “melting time” in the enlivening presence of the spirit of God, so heaven and earth would “melt with fervent heat” in the End Times.⁶³ God restored his image within the human soul as he would in the universe at large, through a baptism of fire.

Evangelicals enlisted the wondrous and fearful associations of electricity to give contemporary color to the narrative of the Apocalypse. During the final battle between good and evil in John Pring’s Miltonic epic, *Millennium Eve*, the archangel Michael “shakes his sword electric high” against “those condemn’d to die.”⁶⁴ Electricity proved equally useful in furnishing solutions to problems arising from literalist interpretations of prophecy. Daniel Dana Buck, a Methodist Episcopal minister from Upstate New York, acknowledged the logistical challenges arising from John’s claim that, during the Second Advent, “all the tribes of the earth” will be gathered to witness a sign in the heavens. Buck

⁶² Jeremiah Ingalls, *The Christian Harmony; Or, Songster’s Companion* (Exeter, N. H.: Henry Ranlet, 1805), 21–2. Other examples of apocalyptic verse in *The Christian Harmony* include “The Millennium” (pp. 84–5) and “Judgment Hymn” (pp. 123–4).

⁶³ See, for instance, the journals of Francis Asbury. On August 27, 1775, Asbury, travelling in North Carolina, witnessed the devastation caused by a powerful storm to imagine the scene of future judgment, “when ‘the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat.’” On August 5, 1776, having withdrawn to the woods for a time of prayer and self-examination, Asbury wrote, “I found myself much melted,” though he then chastened himself for taking any comfort in divine favor with the awareness of “so many immortal souls...posting down to everlasting fire.” Francis Asbury, *The Journal of Rev. Francis Asbury*, Vol. I (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1786), 162, 194.

⁶⁴ John Pring, *Millennium Eve: A Poem* (London: Thomas Cadell, 1843), 33.

countered that that “this luminous sign may be *electrical* in its nature, and, of consequence, instantaneous in its passage from place to place”—an exegetical move that he credited to Christ himself: “For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be.”⁶⁵

No electrical experiments in the early nineteenth century were so full of prophetic potential as those involving the temporary reanimation of corpses. While Gale claimed never to have used electricity himself to bring the dead back to life, he was emboldened by the reports of fellow electrotherapists to describe how such a course of treatment could proceed. When treating a case of drowning, Gale wrote, the body should be wrapped in warm blankets, and three to four hundred shocks should be passed up and down the body (“from hand to hand, through the breast, and from the neck or shoulders to the feet”), until signs of recovery are spotted. Such treatment had a reasonable hope of success, he claimed, even twelve hours after death. The Promethean powers of the electrotherapist had limits, however. In cases of electrocution, Gale admitted little hope of restoring life, “except the resurrection power.”⁶⁶

While figures such as Gale reveled in scientific attempts to master the powers of life, interpreting such efforts as divinely mandated, others mocked their vanity. Causes and processes that Gale took to be natural others coded as supernatural and therefore out of bounds to prying human minds. John Cumming, a popular London preacher and premillennialist whose works were popular in America, asked readers to “Study that marvel—life.... Man never has been able by any combination of mechanical forces, or by

⁶⁵ Daniel Dana Buck, *Our Lord's Great Prophecy, and Its Parallels Throughout the Bible, Harmonized and Expounded* (New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1856), 428.

⁶⁶ Gale, *Electricity*, 237.

any arrangement of chemical powers, to originate life.” Ridiculing Andrew Crosse, the British amateur scientist who achieved notoriety after the press reported in 1836 that his experiments in electrocrystalization had created new insect life, Cumming noted, “a philosopher thought he had done it by galvanism, but a little more philosophy told him that he had only discovered what God had done there before.”⁶⁷

Perhaps resurrection touched too close to home. Evangelicals could in general embrace electricity as a means to describe God’s vitalizing presence in the smaller and greater worlds, in the thrilling and disorienting experiences of conversion and revival no less than in the grand cosmic acts of creation and destruction. Electricity’s patent practical utility in the alleviation of human suffering seemed to authorize even some of the more speculative cosmological and eschatological musings. But electrotherapy was not the only antebellum practice that put people in the pathway of imponderable fluids. In the 1840s, animal magnetism became a focus of delight and debate in American culture. Unlike the dark glass of analogy, which was prone to error, animal magnetism promised a direct means of observing invisible realities through novel powers of clairvoyance. Such ambitious claims would raise the stakes, as well as the risks, for evangelicals who engaged them in the search for a key to unlock the deep structures of nature and prophecy, including the mysteries of the spiritual body.

Edward Hitchcock, Theophilus Packard, and Mesmerism

On August 18, 1841, the Rev. Theophilus Packard, senior pastor of the First Congregational Church in Shelburne, Massachusetts, hosted a gathering at his home.

⁶⁷ John Cumming, *The Finger of God* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1854), 10. On Galvani and Volta, see Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Pantheon Press, 2009), 314.

The fourth-generation descendant of the Puritan Samuel Packard, who had migrated from England in 1638, Theophilus was an imposing presence, thick set with birds-nest eyebrows, which he drew down menacingly while engaged in conversation. Since 1798, he had served the congregation of Shelburne, a picturesque village on the eastern banks of the Deerfield River in the foothills of the Berkshires. The town's bucolic setting masked its deep religious divisions. When Packard had auditioned for minister, he had been the twentieth candidate interviewed. Through sheer force of personality he united the church and for the next half-century presided happily over a series of local revivals, including one co-led by Archibald Alexander, who later became the professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary.⁶⁸ In 1826, Packard welcomed his son, Theophilus Jr., as colleague pastor. In the 1840s, the son gradually assumed the active ministerial duties, leaving the father free to engage in other pursuits, including a budding interest in the novel science of animal magnetism.⁶⁹

Animal magnetism, or mesmerism, originated with the experiments of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815). Mesmer's earliest cures, which took place in France in the mid-1780s, resembled electrotherapy in a number of respects. Mesmeric therapies observed a cosmology and rationale nearly identical to electrotherapy. Disease resulted from a deficiency in the vital ether, which the skilled technician replenished. The sick body was a damaged vessel to be filled up with life-giving energy, restoring it to natural

⁶⁸ William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1857), 411.

⁶⁹ Biographical material on Theophilus Packard can be found in Theophilus Packard Jr., *A History of the Churches and Ministers, and of Franklin Association, in Franklin County, Mass.* (Boston: S. K. Whipple and Co., 1854), 328–9; Edward Hitchcock, *The fully ripe grain gathered in; sermon, funeral of Rev. Theophilus Packard, Shelburne, Sept. 19, 1855* (Greenfield, Mass.: Charles A. Mirick, 1856); and Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 408–411.

equilibrium. Mesmer's early treatments also involved artificial devices (Mesmer would ask his subjects to swallow a liquid containing iron traces and then apply magnets to the body). Soon, however, he dispensed with the accessories and attributed his cure to an occult energy, or fluid, which he called animal magnetism.⁷⁰

During sessions, which typically lasted a half-hour, the patient sat in front of the mesmerizer, who held the subject's thumbs and stared deeply into her eyes for several minutes, establishing a sympathetic bond and sending the patient into a mesmeric sleep. By making sweeping motions with his hands along the patient's body and face, the mesmerizer directed his own magnetic fluid to the body of the patient. This practice could result in strong reactions from the patient, including cries of pain, which were read to indicate the presence of disease. By dwelling on these sites, the mesmerizer directed an excess of magnetic energy to the site, then drew off the pain to the extremities, usually the feet. The fluid could also be directed from third parties or from objects, such as gloves or handkerchiefs, which had been previously magnetized.⁷¹

Mesmer's disciple, the Marquis de Puységur (1752–1807), tweaked the practice and in the process began to tap the levels of mind that lay beneath rational self-consciousness. After his patients were put into a magnetic sleep, they performed marvelous actions. In the fourth and deepest level of sleep, the somnambulant state, the

⁷⁰ W. R. Ward, *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 172. On the history of mesmerism, see Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). On mesmerism in the American context, see Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*; Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁷¹ Thomas Buckland, *The Handbook of Mesmerism* (London: Hippolyte Bailliere, 1850), 15–24.

subject “appears to acquire new senses,” wrote George Sandby, the evangelical Anglican clergyman and author of *Mesmerism and its Opponents* (1844). Somnambulents displayed surprising new powers of clairvoyance, including mental travelling, thought-reading, “prevision” or precognition, and “introvision,” the ability to look inside the human body and report the condition of a diseased organ.⁷² It was this last ability that Packard sought most to employ.

It is unclear how Packard first came to study mesmerism. In Britain, where it experienced a surge in popularity among Anglican evangelicals at roughly the same time, clergy often were introduced to the novel science, Alison Winter writes, “in an effort to vet its pious status for someone in their moral charge.”⁷³ By Packard’s own estimate, he had employed his powers of magnetic clairvoyance to diagnose disease in some two hundred cases, each one carefully recorded for posterity.⁷⁴ Such exertions, he admitted, had made him something of a local “wonder.” He also acknowledged that, by having “practically connected himself with an agency so full of *wonder* and *mystery*, however good and useful for suffering humanity,” his actions had sown suspicions among a busy few.

⁷² Buckland, *Handbook of Mesmerism*, 31.

⁷³ Winter, *Mesmerized*, 251. As Winter has noted, the list of Anglican preachers who took up mesmerism in the 1840s included Samuel Wilberforce, William Scoresby, George Sandby, Thomas Pyne, Robert Holdsworth, and William Davey, a Wesleyan preacher and a celebrated mesmerist itinerant. Winter argues that evangelical Anglican clergy were attracted to mesmerism’s potential as a “pastoral science” to shore up clerical authority, which was being eroded by the rise of professional medical and scientific authority, as well as by defections to Roman Catholicism, factors which I argue were not as significant in the antebellum American context. Theophilus Packard, for instance, did not begin practicing mesmerism until he had already relinquished active pastoral responsibilities and neither advertized his engagement with it nor defended its use as a pastoral science.

⁷⁴ Unfortunately, if such records still exist, I have been unable to recover them. Ted Chomack, the church historian of First Church, Shelburne, claims that the church has no records relating to Packard.

When gossip reached his ears that Shelburne's minister had a sideline in the dark arts, he called a council, consisting of four local Congregational ministers, to determine whether he had acted "inconsistently with his ministerial character, or even by *satanic agency*," according to a report published in *The Boston Courier*.⁷⁵ In its report, the council wrote that, while its members were by "no means prepared to stand forth as the advocates of animal magnetism in the abstract," they found that its "close relation to theology and human comfort" made it an "appropriate study of the minister of the gospel," especially one like Packard whose motives appeared purely benevolent.⁷⁶ Like electrotherapy, mesmerism first achieved fame from its sensational public displays, which mixed serious science with circus sideshow. In the view of its leading practitioners, however, the practice demanded a high degree of moral probity and preparation.⁷⁷ For Joseph Deleuze, the faculty of magnetizing was a "religious act" that required the "greatest purity of intention." God's gifts were not toys. Engaging animal magnetism for amusement or curiosity was a

⁷⁵ *The Boston Courier*, Nov. 28, 1842. The four ministers present were Moses Miller of West Hawley, Amariah Chandler of Greenfield, Tyler Thatcher of Hawley, and Edward Hitchcock of Amherst. The report was originally published in *The Greenfield Gazette*, Nov. 22, 1842. More than twenty-five years later, it was repackaged as an appendix in an edition of Joseph P. F. Deleuze's *Practical Instruction in Animal Magnetism*, trans. Thomas C. Hartshorn. New York: Samuel R. Wells & Co., 1879). The original manuscript of the report is in the Amherst College Archives. "Result of a Council Convened August 18, 1841 by the Request and at the House of Rev. Theophilus Packard D.D. In Shelburne, Massachusetts' Re: Animal Magnetism." August 18, 1841. Edward and Orra White Hitchcock Collection, Amherst College Archives, Box 21, folder 6.

⁷⁶ *Boston Courier*, Nov. 28, 1842.

⁷⁷ Mesmerists were encouraged to abstain from stimulants such as caffeine and alcohol, and to avoid putting "questions of curiosity" to his subject while in the somnambulant state. The mesmerist was to speak to the patient solely of the disease and how to cure it. Buckland, *Handbook of Mesmerism*, 33.

“profanation” of this God-given ability, a view that cohered closely with Packard’s own.⁷⁸
With great power came great responsibility.

Unfortunately, the council’s report did little to dispel the rumors that Shelburne had become the new Salem. Two days after Christmas in 1843, Packard called another committee to meet in his home. This time, the defendant was Benoni Pratt, a church deacon accused of slandering Packard. The discussion heated up when Pratt, while denying that he had spread the suggestion that the senior pastor was engaging in witchcraft, would not concede him the right to practice animal magnetism at his discretion, while retaining his position in the church. The committee concurred. The moderator, speaking for Pratt, noted how “Many, even multitudes, here and throughout the country feel as he does, & regret the course the Senior Pastor has taken.”⁷⁹

Edward Hitchcock spoke next. Hitchcock’s name carried weight in the western end of Massachusetts. A Congregational minister and a well-respected natural historian, as well as the president of Amherst College, Hitchcock had written the 1842 report absolving Packard. He began his remarks by acknowledging his sadness and “embarrassment” with the situation, noting that he held both men in respect. Nevertheless, he asked, did all those present understand the recent progress made with respect to mesmerism? While it could not yet claim to be an established science, he said, “Never was so much doing in respect to it as now. It will be looked at.” If so, he continued, who should do the investigating? “Shall infidels, materialists? They have had

⁷⁸ Buckland, *Handbook of Mesmerism*, 15.

⁷⁹ First Congregational Church (Shelburne, Mass.), “Meeting Minutes, 1835,” Congregational Library & Archives, Boston, 6.

the field long enough. No: Christians & Christian ministers are the men.”⁸⁰ It was clear, Hitchcock believed, that mesmerism, undertaken as a spiritual practice by orthodox believers, offered “a probable means of advancing knowledge & piety.” He felt it only proper that a man who had “devoted himself & given much attention to the science of mind in connection with theology” should now devote himself, in the “decline of life,” to cultivating the practical application of this new therapy to the relief of human suffering. “Can it be that Shelburne will censure its pastor for devoting his last days to examine such a subject, a subject which has evidently strengthened & improved his spirituality? It will not do.” The deacon’s accusations could not be justified, he concluded, “except on a principle becoming not this day, but the dark ages.”⁸¹

Hitchcock’s interest in mesmerism exceeded its possible application in the ministry of benevolence. Hitchcock was drawn to mesmerism because it seemed to offer a means to tap into invisible forces of nature and thereby unlock the deep structures of the universe. Though he never attempted magnetic clairvoyance himself, Hitchcock leaned heavily on the experiences and testimony of those such as Packard who testified to the perception of a reality undisclosed to the common senses. Hitchcock believed that the

⁸⁰ Hitchcock’s argument was similar in many ways to those made by British evangelicals such as Henry Wilberforce. Writing in the *Christian Remembrancer* in 1847, Wilberforce argued that no “great instrument” such as animal magnetism should be left in the hands of “unbelievers” (quoted in Winter, *Mesmerized*, 251):

Has no harm been done, when science has been left in the possession of those who longed to employ it against God and His Church?... Animal magnetism, indeed, has no necessary or even natural connexion with unbelief.... But it is equally true that some of its ablest advocates in this country are evidently unbelievers, and desirous of using it as an instrument against Christianity. Under these circumstances, it is wisest to leave it in their hands, or to employ it ourselves?”

⁸¹ First Congregational Church, “Meeting Minutes, 1835,” 10.

“facts” carefully accrued through the study of mesmerism and related practices could demonstrate the existence of an imponderable ether that linked the worlds of nature and supernature, a mysterious “third substance” that would furnish the *prima materia* of the spiritual body and heal the creation from the deleterious effects of the Fall in its transition to the millennial landscape, where men and women would exercise god-like powers, exploring suns and communicating telepathically with angels on distant planets.

Edward Hitchcock and the Luminiferous Ether

In general, supporters of mesmerism claimed that animal magnetism was a natural property, subject to scientific scrutiny. But there was no consensus on how terms like natural and spiritual should be defined. And so, just as T. Gale saw no conflict in lauding the “natural” force of electricity as a “fountain of supernatural insolation [radiation],” mesmerists who described their work as natural often described it elsewhere as spiritual.⁸² This slippage could be traced in part to the dual nature of the ether, as well as human anthropology. The prominent mesmerist Jacques Deleuze argued that, as every mesmerist consists of body and soul, “the influence he exerts participates in the properties of both.” Accordingly, Deleuze distinguished between three actions in magnetism: physical, spiritual, and “mixed action.” While in Deleuze’s opinion, there could be no question of confusing these categories, for common practitioners, they could be challenging to differentiate.⁸³

Hitchcock’s description of mesmerism shows the easy slippage between natural and supernatural categories. In 1843, Hitchcock told the committee in Shelburne that

⁸² Gale, *Electricity*, 94.

⁸³ Quoted in Buckland, *Handbook of Mesmerism*, 8.

mesmerism might well be able to account for “the phenomena of light & heat & electricity without resorting to Satanic agency or to miracles.” Wasn’t it possible, he continued, that mesmerism was the very method “in which dying Christians sometimes are sustained when the hour of death is come,” and which offer the soul “views of heaven and fit it for a triumphant departure?”⁸⁴ While Hitchcock believed that mesmerism engaged natural rather than supernatural forces, its possible intermediary role in translating the soul to the afterlife complicated definitions of what counted as “natural.”

Packard’s discoveries and ongoing struggles in Shelburne provided the backdrop for Hitchcock’s most ambitious period of theological reflection. In a trilogy of works from the 1850s—*Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomenon in the Four Seasons* (1850), *The Religion of Geology* (1851), and *Religious Truth Illustrated by Science* (1857)—Hitchcock sketched out the rudiments of what he called a “science of heaven”: a speculative metaphysics of the deep structures of space and time based on “facts” discovered experimentally through animal magnetism and spiritualism—vitalist practices that relied on the manipulation of an electrical fluid or luminiferous ether.

Edward Hitchcock’s first theological ruminations on the ether appear in *Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomenon in the Four Seasons*. Modeled on James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1730), the work exemplifies what I have earlier described as the private voice of evangelical natural theology, an insider language of experimental piety.⁸⁵ In the first chapter, Hitchcock takes up the classic analogy between springtime and the Christian hope of resurrection. Addressing contemporary objections raised to the notion of a bodily

⁸⁴ First Congregational Church, “Meeting Minutes, 1835,” 10.

⁸⁵ For more on the distinction between the “public” and “private” languages of natural theology, see chapter two.

resurrection, Hitchcock argued that the spiritual body described by Paul would share only an “infinitesimal germ” with our original selves, a germ composed of a “third substance, distinct both from matter and spirit.” This liminal substance, Hitchcock suggested, likely consisted of the luminiferous ether, an “exceedingly subtle and active fluid” that was “diffused through every part of the material universe” and responsible for transmitting light, heat, and electricity. While not prepared to conclude beyond doubt that the electrical ether would furnish the saints with incorruptible bodies, Hitchcock seemed encouraged by reports that this “attenuated matter” was impervious to all mechanical or chemical action, which suggested that a body composed of it might dwell comfortably “in the midst of the sun, or the volcano, or in the polar ice.”⁸⁶ Though the ether was not cognizable by the senses, he argued, “certain phenomena indicate its existence and prodigious activity.”⁸⁷

In *Religious Lectures*, Hitchcock made no mention of the influence of mesmerism or other vitalist practices on his theories. Perhaps his audience kept him from being more forthcoming. The work was a published version of a series of oral addresses delivered in the late 1840s to the graduating classes of Amherst College and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Hitchcock may have wished to avoid any perceived impropriety in introducing controversial subjects to young ears. However, it is clear that the reports of Theophilus Packard and other magnetic healers helped to shape his thought throughout this period. Packard and Hitchcock were good friends and had frequent opportunity to discuss science and natural theology at Amherst College, where Packard served on the board of directors. During the church meeting at Packard’s home in December 1843 at which

⁸⁶ Hitchcock, *Religious Lectures*, 28.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

Hitchcock defended Packard's mesmeric activities, Hitchcock expressed his gratitude to Packard his helpful input on his work, especially his "interest & suggestions regarding [the philosophy of] mind."⁸⁸

Hitchcock returned to the imponderable fluid again in *The Religion of Geology*, his most popular work.⁸⁹ This time, Hitchcock laid his cards on the table. Proof of the existence of the luminiferous ether derived, he claimed, from mesmerism, that "incipient and maltreated science."⁹⁰ In addition, he cited the work of Baron Karl Ludwig Reichenbach, a German chemist who propounded the theory of an "odic force." Named after the Norse god Odin, this magnetic fluid was identical in its properties and effects with those of the luminiferous ether. The fluid, he reported, issued from the fingers of particularly sensitive humans in the form of bluish flames. It also emanated from crystals and shot forth from the planet as the aurora borealis. The odylic reaction, Hitchcock wrote, explained "many popular superstitions, and also the phenomenon of mesmerism, without a resort to superhuman agency, either satanic or angelic."⁹¹

Backed by the facts presented by Packard, Reichenbach, and others, Hitchcock confidently took his speculations further afield, dwelling at length on the catastrophic geological processes by which the planet would be slowly refined and renewed, atom by

⁸⁸ First Congregational Church, "Meeting Minutes, 1835," 7.

⁸⁹ An interesting side note: Charles L. Webster & Company's ten-volume *Library of American Literature*, which included work by Washington Irving, William Ellery Channing, William Cullen Bryant, and James Fenimore Cooper, included one selection from Hitchcock's long list of publications: the section on the luminiferous ether from *The Religion of Geology*. See Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson, eds., *A Library of American Literature*, Vol. 5 (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1888).

⁹⁰ Hitchcock, *Religion of Geology*, 403.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 424.

atom, on its way to becoming the new earth. For an undisclosed period in the future, the earth would offer little more than a landscape of churning lava, but to the upgraded faculties of the ethereal body, the contemplation of nature would offer joys far surpassing those found on the old earth. Though to “mortal vision” it may seem only “an ocean of fire,” he wrote, the “most enchanting landscapes of the present world” would offer no match for the millennial landscape. “New fields and new glories” would fill the soul with “ecstasy.”⁹²

Hitchcock was not the first to link the spiritual body to an ethereal medium and to powerful new modes of perception. Writing in the 1690s, before the birth of his son, John, Samuel Wesley anticipated Hitchcock’s eschatological musings with his own body electric, a “sensorium” enrobed in the “purest aether”:

The body then shall be all eye, all ear, all sense in the whole, and every sense in every part. In a word, it shall be all over a common sensorium; and being made of the purest aether, without the mixture of any lower or grosser element, the soul shall, by one undivided act, perceive all the variety of objects which now cannot...reach our sense.... Hence we assert, that every *individual person in heaven and hell* shall hear and see all that passes in either state; these to a more extensive aggravation of their tortures, by the loss of what the other enjoy; and those of a greater increase of their bliss, in escaping what the other suffer.⁹³

Hitchcock similarly wondered how novel sensory functions would bathe the soul in new modes of experience. He imagined “a thousand new inlets into the soul—nay, I think of it as all eye, all ear, all sensation; now plunging deeper into the infinitesimal parts of matter than the microscope can carry us, and now soaring away, perhaps on the waves

⁹² Ibid., 406–7.

⁹³ Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Samuel Wesley* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1866), 147.

of the mysterious ether, far beyond the ken of the telescope.”⁹⁴ Other novel powers included telepathy, by which the saints would transmit “thoughts and desires, and receive impressions, through the luminiferous ether, with only the same velocity as light,” communicating with “other beings upon the sun, at a distance of one hundred million miles, in eight minutes.”⁹⁵

Sensing that he had wandered from hard fact into soft theory, Hitchcock arrested the train of “hypothetical, yet fascinating thoughts.” But he made no apology. Like Gale, Hitchcock wrote with a sense of millennial urgency. “In a very short time, far shorter than we imagine,” he wrote, “all the scenes of futurity will be to us a thrilling reality.”⁹⁶ But to say the millennium was at hand does not do it full justice. For mesmerists such as Packard, it was already a felt reality. Like other “signs of the times,” mesmerism fulfilled prophecy in present time and space, establishing what Hitchcock described as a “link between the present and the future world.”⁹⁷ Akin to Baxterian modes of contemplating heaven through the things of the material world, mesmerism functioned as an

⁹⁴ Hitchcock, *Religion of Geology*, 406–7.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 407.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 403. Hitchcock claims that he first learned of mesmerism from Chauncy Hare Townsend’s *Facts in Mesmerism* (1840) and that he encountered the same concepts in Isaac Taylor’s *Physical Theory of Another Life* (1836). Hitchcock wrote that though Taylor made no reference to mesmerism in his work, he suggested that the “state of things to come can be felt and found in the here and now.” For instance, Taylor noted the scientific belief that light was caused by the vibrations of an “elastic fluid,” which carried sonic vibrations “far too delicate to awaken the ear of man,” connecting the universe into one “theatre of a vast social economy, holding rational intercourse at vast distances.” While contemplating the night sky, Taylor imagined “anthems of praise...arising from worshippers in all corners” and “inquiry and response, commands and petitions, debate and instruction...passing to and fro” and coming together until “it meet and shake the courts of the central heavens.” Hitchcock, *Religion of Geology*, 403.

eschatological practice that encouraged practitioner and explainer alike to live each moment with one foot planted in the new earth. “Let us, then, live continually under the influence of the scenes that await us beyond the grave,” wrote Hitchcock, such that, “while yet in the body, we shall begin to breathe the empyreal air of the new heavens, and to gather the fruits of the tree of life in the new earth.”⁹⁸

In *Religious Truth Illustrated from Science*, published in 1857, Hitchcock theologized the ether a final time. Seeming both more adventurous and more cautious, he addressed mesmerism but also the related vitalist practice of spiritualism.⁹⁹ Hitchcock hesitated to offer his unqualified endorsement, yet described them as fledgling sciences and “gateways” that offered “a glimpse of scenery the most enchanting, though the fogs of night still rest upon much of it.”¹⁰⁰ His caution may have stemmed from fallout over the spiritualist controversy, which had erupted in the years since the publication of *The Religion of Geology*.¹⁰¹ Evangelicals in general found it easy to support the practical utility of electricity in primitive physick and could even accept the analogical or exegetical utility of spiritualizing the electrical fluid to expound difficult prophecies pertaining to the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 407.

⁹⁹ Hitchcock was also a devotee of the new science of phrenology. In May 1847, Hitchcock received a phrenological report by Orson Squire Fowler and his brother Lorenzo Niles Fowler, both of whom had attended Amherst College. The report, which stresses Hitchcock’s rational temperament and avoidance of “enthusiasm” in religion, can be found with Hitchcock’s papers in Edward and Orra White Hitchcock Papers, Amherst College Archives, box 1, folder 2.

¹⁰⁰ Hitchcock, *Religious Truth Illustrated from Science*, 169.

¹⁰¹ On spiritualism and the spiritualist controversy, see R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Anne Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: Indiana University Press, 2001).

apocalypse and the new earth. But a theology of electricity that appeared to generate new revelation was another matter—especially when its prophets seemed to supplement or openly contradict the testimony of written scripture. In a typical attack on spiritualism in the *North American Review* in 1855, one writer dubbed the movement a brand of “modern necromancy” and proscribed it as being at odds with revelation.¹⁰²

The scandal surrounding spiritualism rebounded on mesmerism. Writing in *The New-York Evangelist* in 1854, the Rev. Charles White of Wabash College denounced the “indulgence of visionary speculations” of table-turners, phrenologists, Swedenborgians, and mesmerists. “We leave all these where we have left the consultation of Pythons, and bird-flights and entrails...where we have left magic and sorcery and charms and talismans and astrologies and alchemies.” At least alchemy, he noted begrudgingly, had given birth to chemistry. These modern forms of witchery had produced only “fictions and fancies.”¹⁰³ Other writers left readers to draw their own conclusions. Pointing up the similarities between mesmerism and folk magic, the Methodist J. T. Crane argued that

¹⁰² “Modern Necromancy,” *North American Review* 80 (1855): 512–27.

¹⁰³ Charles White, “Indulgence of Visionary Speculations,” *New-York Evangelist*, Nov. 9, 1854; 22, 45. Amanda Porterfield argues that Ellen G. White, the founder of Seventh-Day Adventism, condemned mesmerism as satanic in part because of its similarity to religious states of sanctification. After experiencing trances and visions in the 1840s, which she identified with sanctification, White arranged for physicians to observe her bodily states, which, Porterfield writes, included “slowed rates of heartbeat and respiration.” However, when one physician suggested the similarity between her behavior and the features associated with mesmerism, and further offered to put her into a trance himself, White refused, stating that “mesmerism was from the devil.” Porterfield writes, “In positing the existence of subtle currents of magnetic force that many of its adherents presumed to be spiritual in nature, mesmerism offered a metaphysical alternative to evangelical theology in the guise of science, claiming to confirm the essentially spiritual nature of reality through experiments, depersonalized observation, and empirical evidence. For Ellen White and others...mesmerism was a variant on the fusion of religion and health they sought, but a dangerous one that substituted currents of magnetic force for the biblical God and redemption through Christ.” Amanda Porterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 176–8.

traditional magical and occult practices continued to be popular among with many mid-century evangelicals, and noted the ease with which practitioners migrated from older occult practices to newer variants, such as magnetic healing.¹⁰⁴

The fact that many of mesmerism's staunchest champions, like Le Roy Sunderland, had broken with evangelical churches did it no favors.¹⁰⁵ Evangelicals were troubled by the apparent ease with which supporters of mesmerism embraced its fantastic metaphysical claims and promises while rejecting the conventional doctrines and miracles of Christianity as contrary to reason. An article in *The Millennial Harbinger* in 1843 warned of "two opposite extremes" on the matter of the Holy Spirit: those overheated with enthusiastic thoughts of "miraculous operations and supernatural visitations" who confuse "mere animal sympathy" for the influence of the spirit, and those "frigid" skeptics who, by subordinating all to natural law, denied the normal operation of the Holy Spirit on the human heart, yet showed boundless credulity concerning the powers of magnetic

¹⁰⁴ J. T. Crane, "Mystic Arts in our own Day," *The Methodist Quarterly Review* 30 (April 1848): 202–229. In noting continuities between earlier occult and nineteenth-century traditions of vitalism, Crane anticipates Catherine Albanese's notion of continuity and development within "metaphysical religion," which Crane categorizes as the "mystic arts." See Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Alison Winter notes how British evangelical Samuel Wilberforce observed a migration from alchemy to animal magnetism in one of his own charges, a man who, after magnetizing his own daughter and discovering her to be "the most first rate of clairvoyants," concluded that the "Philosopher's Stone was the power of creating, by being placed en rapport with creative power." Winter, *Mesmerized*, 251.

¹⁰⁵ On Le Roy Sunderland, see Anne Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience From Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). In 1842, Theophilus Packard wrote to Sunderland's journal, *The Magnet*, praising its "moral courage" in promoting "the *reality*, the *facts*, the *usefulness*, and the *improving state*, of this novel *science*." Theophilus Packard, *Magnet* (June 1, 1842), 15.

clairvoyance.¹⁰⁶ As ever, evangelicals struggled to articulate a coherent cosmology that avoided the cold grip of deism and the hot fingers of enthusiasm.

Evangelical critics of mesmerism were particularly troubled by mesmerism's challenge to Lockean and Common Sense forms of epistemology. Mesmeric reports appeared to contradict empirical methods of observation, throwing into doubt the most basic "facts" of the universe. An article published in the *New-York Evangelist* in 1837 charged mesmerism with denying the basic groundwork of reality as established by the physical senses, requiring the suspension of all existing knowledge and laws of nature. "When animal magnetists talk to us of persons under the magnetic influence, who can see without eyes, or who can see, smell, and taste, by the pit of the stomach—who can see through absolutely opaque substances, or who can foretell future events in the way of prophecy...we must take the liberty of doubting their veracity." If the human eye and "that ethereal medium called light" were not necessary to the faculty of sight, then "we must give up all pretensions to knowledge."¹⁰⁷

If, however, mesmerism troubled the longstanding Baconian compromise between empiricism and experimental religion, it also complemented evangelical appeals to the spiritual senses. In some ways, the godly clairvoyant who closed her eyes to perceive imponderable currents of light surrounding and pervading the material creation was not so very different from the contemplative who employed the eyes of faith to perceive the deep structural correspondences between nature and scripture. To Hitchcock, Packard saw what the gross senses missed. By testifying firsthand to the world of spirit, he anticipated the sensory delights of the spiritual body that awaited all orthodox believers

¹⁰⁶ "Spirit of God," *The Millennial Harbinger* Vol. 7 (1843), 562.

¹⁰⁷ "Animal Magnetism," *New-York Evangelist* (Nov. 4, 1837), 8, 45.

during the millennium.

Yet, Hitchcock was a timid controversialist. In his final public statement on the luminiferous ether, he declined to take sides in the dispute over spiritualism. In *Religious Truth Illustrated from Science*, he argued that boosters and knockers shared the blame. Some supporters of vitalist practices had rushed to advance speculative theories without attending first to the “facts.” Many opponents, on the other hand, had discarded reported data, simply because it seemed in conflict with established science or religious orthodoxy. Hitchcock called for calm, advising a return to Baconian methods that focused on a close study of facts, “with a scrutiny proportionate to their anomalous and marvellous character.”¹⁰⁸ Theory would come later, once all the data had properly been accounted for.

If he seemed to equivocate, there was no question where his heart lay. Elsewhere in *Religious Truth*, Hitchcock barely concealed his excitement regarding the incipient powers of electricity being revealed in the natural world and in the human body. Citing Alexander von Humboldt’s description of the “torpedo” or electric eel, he speculated whether all plants and animals, including humans, might not possess some similar latent power, waiting to be actualized.¹⁰⁹ In such passages, Hitchcock gestured to the hope that humans might regain their former mastery over the natural world lost by Adam.¹¹⁰ In the

¹⁰⁸ Hitchcock, *Religious Truth*, 170.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 155

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* In the electro-magnet, Hitchcock thought he caught a glimpse of “a prodigious natural force, which lies hidden and silent all around us, and which, if it could only be fully developed, would arm man with an energy almost irresistible.” On the rise of new approaches to the study of nature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the influence of debates concerning the Fall and the extent of damage to the mind and senses

manipulation of such occult forces lay almost unlimited power. For Hitchcock, the question was not whether such practices could be compatible with orthodoxy but how to differentiate godly methods and purposes from ungodly ones.

Excitement regarding the prodigious expansion of human powers was not confined to natural philosophers. Attempts to manipulate ethereal fluids for the benefit of the individual and society united clergy and laity, elite and popular culture. For instance, the Baptist Judson Hutchinson, of the Hutchinson Family Singers, dabbled extensively in spiritualism.¹¹¹ (The family were friends with Andrew Jackson Davis, the magnetic healer whose writings supplied a theoretical framework for the explosion of spiritualism in the 1850s.¹¹²) While riding in a boat to Block Island, Rhode Island, Judson “suddenly jumped upon the forward deck, and waving his hat, shouted, ‘Come up out of the mighty deep!’ Instantly a big fish, apparently ten feet long, leaped out of the water and seemed to stand on his tail for a moment and then disappeared.”¹¹³ Judson’s exhibition of psychic powers was simultaneously a sign of the times and the fulfillment of prophecy, pointing forward to the millennium, when humanity’s rule over nature would be restored in full, while manifesting that restored control in present time and space.¹¹⁴

on those developments, see Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundation of Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹¹¹ In a journal entry from March 1845, Asa Hutchinson wrote of reading O. S. Fowler, a leading phrenologist, on “Moral Philosophy.” Dale Cockrell, ed., *Excelsior: Journals of the Hutchinson Family Singers, 1842–1846* (Pendragon Press, 1989), 306.

¹¹² Dale Cockrell, ed., *Excelsior: Journals of the Hutchinson Family Singers, 1842–1846* (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1989), 205. In 1852, Davis received a vision of a “Spiritual Congress” while a guest at Jesse Hutchinson’s home in Lynn, New Hampshire.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹¹⁴ A similar story can be found in the experience of the South Carolina Methodist Joshua

For Hitchcock, the theology of electricity served a number of functions, but none more important than the promotion of vital piety. Knowledge of the natural world was, Hitchcock wrote, “one of the most important means of the promotion of religion, and of saving piety from degenerating into frigid scepticism or wild fanaticism.”¹¹⁵ Since recent discoveries now made it “nearly certain that electricity, magnetism, galvanism, and electro-magnetism, are all but modifications of one great power in nature, and that is the electric fluid,” any practice that tapped into the great current that powered and unified the phenomena of nature was too rich in allegorical proofs to be written off as humbug or witchcraft.¹¹⁶ Christ promised more life, not less.

Like Gale, Hitchcock was particularly impressed by experiments with electrical current that had managed to resuscitate, however temporarily, animals and humans from the dead. The analogical lessons were patent. Though the “astonishing effects of the galvanic fluid” did not demonstrate that electricity was identical with “the mysterious principle of life,” it proved a “very intimate relation between the two things.”¹¹⁷ The theology of electricity reached into every corner of nature’s cupboard, explaining even

Thomas. Thomas’s biographer, Adam Wallace, quoted his subject as reporting that, long before he knew of “experimental religion,” he would pray to God “to direct me where the fish might be found,” with great success. He found the same success hunting fowl. While the story most likely suggests a form of popular folk magic, Thomas’s favorable report reveals how easily converts employed new theological categories to reinterpret and “baptize” pre-conversion practice and experience. Practices that, to some eyes, might be considered manipulative forms of magic could just as easily be attributed to the operation of the Holy Spirit, providence, or general grace. See Adam Wallace, *The Parson of the Islands: A Biography of the Late Rev. Joshua Thomas* (Philadelphia: Office of the Methodist Home Journal, 1870), 57.

¹¹⁵ Hitchcock, *Religious Truth*, 272.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

strange atmospheric phenomenon such as the aurora borealis. The further one advanced in study, he wrote, “the more enchanting will the prospect become.”¹¹⁸

Hitchcock’s enthusiasm for the enchanting powers of science can be contrasted with other contemporary voices, including those of liberal religion. For Ralph Waldo Emerson, science had stripped the world of wonders as well as the terrors of judgment and wrath. In his journal for September 14, 1839, he wrote:

Now so bad we are that the world is stripped of love and of terror. Here came the other night an Aurora [Borealis] so wonderful, a curtain of red and blue and silver glory, that in any other age or nation it would have moved the awe and wonder of men and mingled with the profoundest sentiments of religion and love, and we all saw it with cold, arithmetical eyes, we knew how many colors shone, how many degrees it extended, how many hours it lasted, and of this heavenly flower we beheld nothing more: a primrose by the rim of the river of time. Shall we not wish back again the Seven Whistlers, the Flying Dutchman, the lucky and unlucky days, and the terrors of the Day of Doom?¹¹⁹

For Hitchcock, as for other evangelicals, electricity was one of the liveliest “signs of the times.” Through manipulation of this unique, mysterious mediating substance, a *prima materia* halfway between matter and spirit, Hitchcock and Packard gleaned insights into the deep structures of space and time. If analogy was an imperfect science and prone

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 188.

¹¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume VII: 1838-1842* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 238–9. Emerson’s concern with the disenchanting effects of science were reflected in British Romanticism. Keats’ poem, “Lamia,” written in 1820, offers once of the most famous examples (quoted in Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder*, 323):

...Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings...
Unweave a rainbow...¹¹⁹

to error or overstatement, offering truth through a mirror darkly, animal magnetism, he hoped, crossed the analogical gulf, tearing aside the veil to gaze directly on heavenly mysteries. Through potent new faculties, the clairvoyant experienced unmediated perception of spiritual realities, the sensorium of the spiritual body in nascent form.

Hitchcock went farther than most evangelicals in his attempt to create a metaphysic transcendental enough to compete with the “rhapsodies of spiritual pantheism.” Yet, his case is representative of antebellum evangelicalism in several respects. First, Hitchcock offers another instance of early evangelical engagement with vitalism. Hitchcock’s spiritualizing of the luminiferous ether fits the characteristic of evangelical vitalism, a metaphysical middle way, characterized on a spectrum from more practical to more speculative forms, through which to harmonize natural philosophy and orthodoxy into what Cotton Mather more than a century earlier called a grand “System of the Sciences...consecrated unto the glorious Intention of living unto God.”¹²⁰ By positing a vitalizing force in nature consisting of equal parts spirit and matter, Hitchcock presented God as intimately engaged in a process of cosmic redemption, gradually transmuting the base matter of a fallen creation into a new heaven and new earth, while retaining an orthodox view of divine sovereignty and transcendence. For Hitchcock, as for late Puritans such as Mather, soteriology and cosmology were conjoined sciences: vital religion fed and flowed from a vital sense of nature.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Cotton Mather, *The Diary of Cotton Mather II*, ed. Worthington C. Ford, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Seventh Series VII–VIII (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1912), 339–40.

¹²¹ On Cotton Mather’s effort to create a synthesis of orthodox theology, mechanistic science, and Christian Hermeticism, see Brett Malcolm Grainger, “Vital Nature and Vital Piety: Johann Arndt and the Evangelical Vitalism of Cotton Mather,” *Church History* 81:4 (December 2012), 852–872.

Hitchcock's theology of electricity also demonstrates a spiritual eclecticism in the tradition of Arndtian *colligere*. That is to say, an eclecticism with definable limits. In some ways, he is an American analog to Friedrich Oetinger, the eighteenth-century German Pietist theologian whom W. R. Ward called an "eclectic to end all eclecticism."¹²² While Oetinger appealed to the theosophical cosmology of Jacob Boehme and the eschatology of Johann Bengel, Hitchcock built upon the data furnished through the experiments of Theophilus Packard and the Baron von Reichenbach. Like Oetinger, Hitchcock seized the spiritual matter of electricity as the centerpiece of his first philosophy. Throughout the 1850s, he labored to construct a grand synthesis of Reformed doctrine, contemporary science, and salvation history. Yet, for all its experimentation, Hitchcock's evangelicalism remained a particularist religious expression, claiming one path to salvation in Jesus Christ. It was an eclecticism pressed into the service of exclusivism.¹²³

Conclusion

¹²² W. R. Ward, *Early Evangelicalism*, 158. On Friedrich Oetinger, see Robert Terrence Llewellyn, "Friedrich Christoph Oetinger and the Paracelsian Tradition: a Disciple of Boehme in the Age of Rationalism," in D. H. Green, L. P. Johnson, and Dieter Wuttke, eds. *From Wolfram to Petrarch to Goethe and Grass: Studies in Literature in Honour of Leonard Forster* (Baden-Baden: V. Koerner, 1982), 539–548); Benz, *The Theology of Electricity*.

¹²³ In advancing Arndt's notion of *colligere* as broadly representative of early evangelical cultural practice, I contrast it with the process of "combinativity" developed by Catharine Albanese. Within the framework of cultural appropriation suggested by Albanese, there are no definable limits to what practices or ideas may be combined. See Catherine L. Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit*. On a related note, this notion of *colligere* may be brought to bear on J. Z. Smith's observation that those movements claiming the least kinship actually had the closest kinship. On one level, this is a truism. On another, it may be too neat an inversion, obscuring how and where religious communities draw lines in thought and practice, especially within Protestantism itself. See J. Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 230–250. (I wish to thank Amy Voorhees for suggesting these lines of critique with Albanese and Smith.)

Towards the end of life, Hitchcock began to waver on the wisdom shown by his colleague in Shelburne Falls. Perhaps, he thought, his old friend may have been playing with fire all along. When Theophilus Packard died in September 1855 at the age of 86—less than one month before his old adversary, Benoni Pratt—Hitchcock traveled west from Amherst to Shelburne to deliver the funerary address. He praised Packard’s deep grasp and application of experimental piety, noting his ability to ponder the darkest tangles of philosophy and theology without losing sight of the chief end of the Christian life: practical growth in love of Christ and love of neighbor. “Every principle that he investigated,” wrote Hitchcock, “was valued chiefly as it bore more or less directly upon Christian practice.”¹²⁴ Yet, he admitted that Packard’s restless investigations of the invisible might have crossed a line. Later in life, he wrote, Packer began to regret having ignored the physical sciences for most of his career, so that,

when the extraordinary discoveries of modern times...were brought out one after another before him, he gave himself up too much to the feeling that nothing was too wonderful to be discovered, and he seemed to lose in a measure the power to discriminate between the true and the false; and hence I fear he became in extreme old age, too ready to fall in with that strange compound of physiology and psychology, called spiritualism.¹²⁵

Later in his eulogy, Hitchcock returned to scratch the itch. Reassuring his audience that the “grand motive” driving Packard’s researches was “the hope and desire of making higher attainments in the knowledge of God and the spiritual world,” he allowed that such assurances could not paper over the nagging fear that his old friend may have strayed across a forbidden threshold.

Towards the close of life, it seemed to me that he had an intense desire to look within the veil, and find out experimentally something of the mode of

¹²⁴ Hitchcock, *Fully Ripe Grain*, 21.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

communion between disembodied spirits. He got an idea that mesmerism would give him glimpses of this sort, and this was one of the reasons that led him to take so deep an interest in that subject. It certainly did for a time increase his spirituality—whether permanently so, I cannot say. It may be that his love of discovering new things tempted him to pry into mysteries which God will not yield up to human curiosity.¹²⁶

By the time of Hitchcock's death in 1866, the ethereal cosmology that had long linked elite and popular culture, practices and speculation, had already begun to come apart. On the elite side of the ledger, imponderable fluids gradually fell out of favor in postbellum scientific circles. In theoretical physics, the Michelson–Morley experiment of 1887 offered the first strong evidence against the ether theory by failing to demonstrate any evidence of the relative motion of matter through the luminiferous ether. After that, scientists turned to other lines of research, a trajectory that culminated in Albert Einstein's theory of special relativity in 1905, which rendered the hypothetical ether superfluous. These changes were part of a larger shift from organism to naturalism in the postbellum scientific worldview. Early in the nineteenth century, the organic model had competed with mechanistic worldview for the place of basic scientific paradigm. Increasing in popularity during the 1820s and 1830s, it had eventually won the field, replacing mechanism until the emergence of naturalism in the 1870s.¹²⁷ There were a few holdovers, such as George Gabriel Stokes, the late-Victorian physicist and Scottish evangelical whose theory of "directionalism" propounded a revised role for the luminiferous ether as a vital force that merely directed the natural forces in how to apply their energies, rather than affecting motion itself.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹²⁷ Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America*, 98.

In popular belief and practice, the situation could not have been more different. Beyond the immediate popularity of spiritualism, the cosmology it promoted influenced a host of new religious movements, including Theosophy, which had clear genealogical ties to spiritualism. Reichenbach's theory of the "odic force," while quickly dismissed by the scientific community, retained its power in popular culture, writes Linda Simon, "fueling a belief in a unified force of nature that linked nervous energy with magnetism, light, and electricity."¹²⁹ The growth in "holistic" forms of medicine in the early twentieth century relied on the ability of skilled practitioners to see and manipulate porous fields of energy surrounding the human body, practices that adapted notions of an all-pervasive imponderable fluid, on which mesmeric practice was based. While modern forms of "spirituality," which often lack clear institutional boundaries, can be as evanescent and difficult to track as the ether itself, they have become one of the most creative and ubiquitous manifestations of religious expression in the twenty-first century.¹³⁰

The eulogies offered at Hitchcock's passing in 1866 reflected the changing times. In a tribute read to the National Academy of Sciences, J. P. Lesley, who like Hitchcock had served as a Congregational minister before devoting himself to geology, described Hitchcock as a creature of contradictions, a man "both timid and adventurous," as exhibited in his partial adoption of the modern glacial drift theory of Agassiz and in his

¹²⁸ On George Gabriel Stokes, see David B. Wilson, "A Physicist's Alternative to Materialism: The Religious Thought of George Gabriel Stokes," *Victorian Studies* 28.1 (Autumn, 1984), 69–96; Wilson, "George Gabriel Stokes on Stellar Aberration and the Luminiferous Ether," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 6.1 (June 1972), 57–72.

¹²⁹ Simon, *Dark Light*, 130.

¹³⁰ For two contrasting genealogies of modern spirituality, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

early embrace of animal magnetism. Lesley, who had left the pulpit in the early 1850s after his theological views shifted to Unitarianism, praised Hitchcock's piety but not his eschatology. "I do not believe in his theology," wrote Lesley. "It savors too much of the central nucleus of fire; it makes our earth-crust too insecure; it is too full of old wives' fables."¹³¹ Lesley was similarly split over the legacy of Hitchcock's engagement with mesmerism. He noted that his subject was among the first "good physical observers" to attend to

those strange and apparently abnormal physical phenomena which went at first by the name of mesmerism, and which have been, since then, followed up and obscured by the fanatical and hurtful dishonesties and shameless and tasteless profanities of the modern round table. The evils attendant upon this strange psychological epidemic he was as quick to see as any man...but no amount of materialistic denunciation from the side of specific science could scare this fearless investigator from confessing his faith in what of fact there was, so far as he could discover it, nor from exercising the function of true science—to wash his facts from the filth in which they were rolled.¹³²

Without openly criticizing Hitchcock, Lesley suggested that he might have left his facts to soak in the suds a little longer.

¹³¹ J. Peter Lesley, *Memoir of Edward Hitchcock* [S.I.: s.n., 1866], 134.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 132–3.

Conclusion

The story of nature and religion in America has traditionally been told as an outworking of the antebellum quest for a larger faith, a faith expansive enough to match the grand landscapes of the new republic. A corollary of this turn to nature was the rejection of a bellicose and constrictive orthodoxy immune to nature's charms. The cast of characters who have peopled such narratives—figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir, who rejected the stern Campbellite Baptist faith of his upbringing for what he called “baptism in Nature's warm heart...every wild lesson a love lesson, not whipped but charmed into us”—either gradually outgrew nature's God or decisively spurned Protestant Christianity for the worship of nature.¹

There is no question that, for many evangelicals, disenchantment has offered a doorway to a new forms of belief and practice that celebrated the divinity of nature.² It is also beyond doubt that the rise of nineteenth-century liberal religious movements such as Unitarianism and of “seeker spirituality” more generally played a crucial role in the culture of the early republic, especially in literary movements such as the American Renaissance. At the same time, such narratives should not preclude other possible trajectories or be allowed to set the horizons to our curiosity about religion and nature in antebellum America.

¹ Thomas R. Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 51. Other prominent cases of disenchanted evangelicals turning to nature include Ernest Thompson Seton (nature writer and cofounder of the North American Boy Scouts), Sigurd Olson (son of Baptist minister, nature writer, and early conservationist), David Brower (founder of the Sierra Club), and Dave Foreman (founder of Earth First!).

² On evangelical disenchantment, see David N. Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

Accordingly, this dissertation has attempted a retrieval of traditions of nature piety among antebellum evangelicals, a tradition whose origins, features, and significance have yet to be fully identified and incorporated into scholarly narratives of nineteenth-century American religion. Through an array of practices relating to conversion or the “new birth” (including field preaching, camp meetings, and outdoor baptism) and the “new life” in Christ that followed (including the contemplative study of nature and alternative healing techniques such as water-cure), evangelicals advanced what James Delbourgo has called “an American tradition of zealous spiritual interpretations of nature.”³ Layering forests, hills, rivers, and other sites with allusions to biblical holy spaces, believers created sacred landscapes that opened pathways to personal and collective transformation.

While the motivations behind this new attention to nature in some ways paralleled the concerns of Romantics and Transcendentalists, it also fed on more ancient debates within Christianity concerning the spiritual senses, models of spiritual progress, and the pursuit of divine union. The republication of Puritan and Pietist devotional manuals as well the creative misinterpretation of poetic works by deists such as Alexander Pope and Erasmus Darwin all contributed to a daily practice of reading the invisible in the things that are seen, a tradition that John Fletcher called “evangelical mysticism.” Eclectic, unsystematic, and predominantly practical, nature piety could occasionally flower into more-speculative attempts to map the deep structures of the cosmos and to unlock prophecies pertaining to the “new earth.” One example of this was the “theology of electricity,” which fed on curiosity relating to electrotherapy, animal magnetism, and related practices that relied on theories of imponderable ethers, mysterious fluids that

³ James Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 218.

seemed to supply a bridge between the worlds of spirit and matter, while safeguarding the dualistic division of the orthodox universe.

Nature piety united evangelicals across barriers such as region, gender, and denomination, in some cases providing a common ground that transcended theological differences. It linked practitioners and theorists, elite and popular culture, clergy and laity. It encouraged the pervasive sense that believers had recovered the true, primitive worship celebrated in the Garden of Eden. Lost or perverted through idolatrous abuses soon after the Fall, this “pure Adamic worship” was gaining ground every day in the “sacred groves” of Methodists and other revivalist groups, under the direction of the Holy Spirit and in imitation of scriptural precedents, a project many felt to betoken millennial import.

In contrast to historical narratives that assert a disenchantment of the world stemming from the corrosive social processes of modernization and capitalism, or from the outworking of the theological program of the Protestant Reformation, which by condemning transubstantiation and other forms of priestly magic prepared the way for more radical assaults on the sacramental potential of matter, evangelical nature piety is a story of change, adaptation, and persisting tensions. The fact that believers felt consistently torn between the desire to cleanse the landscape of idols and the drive to sanctify natural sites marked by the Holy Spirit complicates any simple assessment of evangelicals as agents of either enchantment or disenchantment. Whatever popularity they enjoyed, practices of vital piety that engaged the divine in nature stirred delight as well as fear, and created consensus as well as controversy. Mesmerists faced accusations of enlisting satanic agency and revivalists were called upon to distinguish camp-meeting practices from the polytheistic grove worship that characterized the cult of ancient Canaanites. Enthusiasm for the seemingly miraculous properties of mineral springs and

water-cure facilities was offset by fears of pollution arising from the reputation of spas as seats of intemperance and other vices. Advanced spiritual practices such as periodic retreat for the contemplation of nature required believers—particularly women—to defend themselves against charges of pantheism and quietism and to rearticulate the theological tension between immanence and transcendence in ways that set them apart from the animistic cosmologies of Native American religions and from Romantic and Transcendentalist forms of pantheism. In most cases, evangelicals defended themselves by appealing to the contemplation of the creatures as a binding duty, a corollary of the love of God. Efforts in spiritualizing the creatures progressed through pain to pleasure, from knowledge of self to knowledge of God, and through union with nature to closer union with Christ, a union that preserved distinction and restored the vital energies necessary for the return to gospel labors in the world.

Many of the most significant recent histories of American attitudes to the natural world have been guided by a quest for the roots of modern conservationist and preservationist thought.⁴ As Leigh Schmidt has noted, “intellectual historians have paid increasing attention to the history of Western ideas about nature and have debated at length the impact of Christianity’s theological heritage on the environmental crisis.” Yet, he argues, this literature has rarely considered the impact of religious practice on attitudes to the natural world, including liturgy and ritual.⁵ The present study has in general avoided seeking ties between nineteenth-century forms of nature piety and contemporary

⁴ See, for instance, Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977).

⁵ Leigh E. Schmidt, “From Arbor Day to the Environmental Sabbath: Nature, Liturgy, and American Protestantism,” *Harvard Theological Review* 84:3 (1991), 299.

concerns such as environmentalism and climate change. Instead, it has focused on tracing the connections between antebellum religious practice and the experience of natural environments, exploring the variety of ways in which evangelicals engaged the creation as both setting and source of spiritual transformation. Some readers, particularly those engaged in theological projects, may find in such stories a usable past. Others might demur, citing the soteriological preoccupation with individual salvation and the absence of explicit repudiation of an ethic of human dominion over nature. Whatever one might choose to think about the coherence, originality, or legacy of these practices and the thought worlds they helped to create, it should no longer be possible simply to ignore them.

Appendix of Images

Image 1 (p. 71)

Woodcut of baptism in the Schuylkill River, in Morgan Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the American Baptists* (Philadelphia: Printed by Edward Steuart, 1768), frontispiece.

Image 2 (p. 81)

Thomas Prichard Rossiter, “Miriam,” frontispiece in H. Hastings Weld, *Women of the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1848) and accompanies “Miriam” by Clara Lucas Balfour on p. [93]-105.

Image 3 (p. 136)

John C. McCrae, “Morning Prayer,” in T. S. Arthur, ed., *The Temperance Offering, for 1853* (New York: Cornish, Lamport, 1853), plate facing p. 225.

Image 4 (pp. 160–1)

“Secret Prayer,” in H. Hastings Weld, ed., *Sacred Annual* (Philadelphia: T. K. Collins Jr., 1851), plate facing p. 54.

Image 5 (p. 184)

“Moses” bottle design for Poland Spring Mineral Water, Poland, Maine. Design circa 1876.

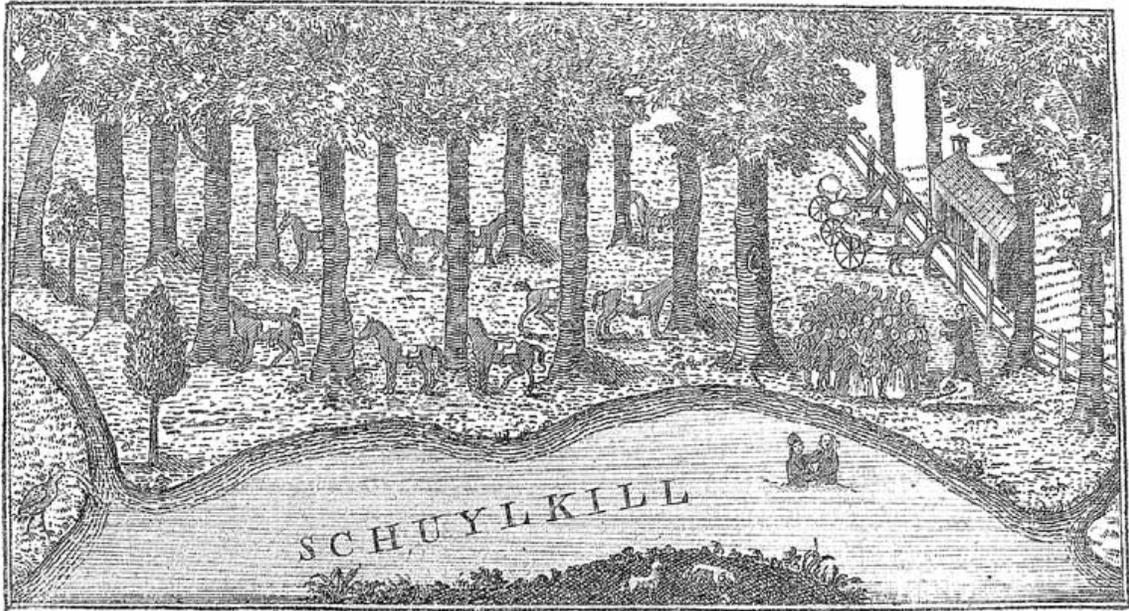
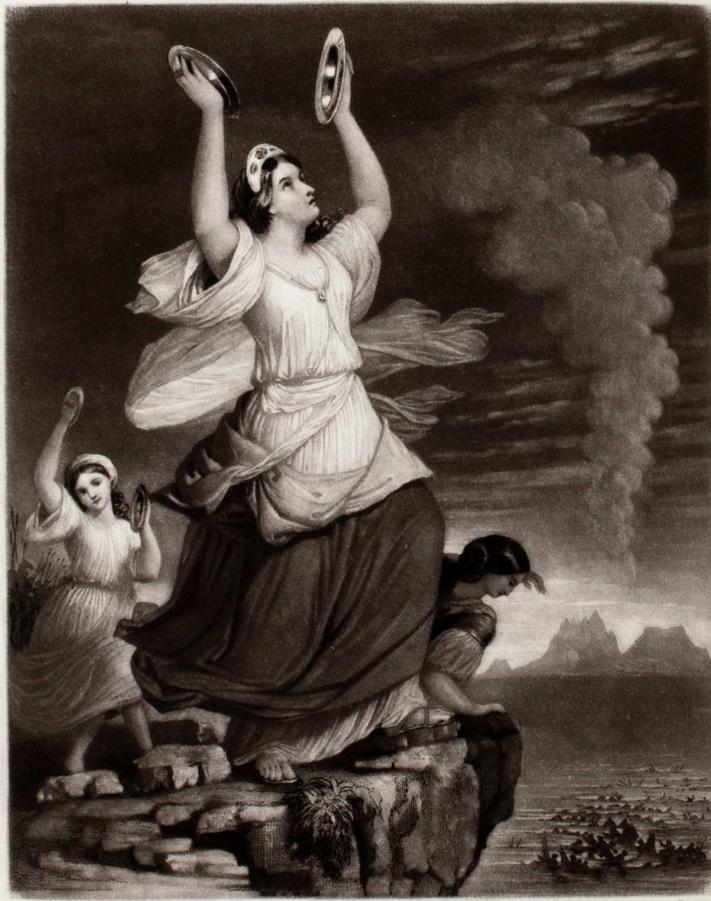


Image 1



Rossetti

Sartain

MIRIAM.

Image 2 (Source: American Antiquarian Society)



M. Rac

The Morning Prayer.

Image 3 (Source: American Antiquarian Society)



SECRET PRAYER.

Image 4 (Source: American Antiquarian Society)



Image 5

(Source: <http://www.baharris.org/historicpolandspring/Packaging/Packaging.htm>)

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