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S. Ray Granade

Ouachita Baptist University, granade@obu.edu

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The Moral Message: Religion in Antebellum America's Bestselling Fiction

by S. Ray Granade

August 1981

Every literate person who enjoys reading can recall a soul-moving book. Certain literary works attract each of us and mark us for life. We have been conditioned to think of the "classics" in this respect. They have struck readers over time, and we peruse them under the tutelage of teachers. But our sense of literature's impact should not be limited to the classics. The books which most influence us, and those which last longest in our minds, are those we wish to read. The schoolroom cliché of books behind the texts (be they comics or novels) is a cliché because of its factualness.

For early nineteenth century readers, the classics held a special place. Educators averred that all worthwhile secular knowledge came from the liberating classics—a holdover from the Enlightenment and the Puritan heritage. (See Randall Stewart, "Puritan Literature and the Flowering of New England." *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 3(1946), 319-342, especially 319-324.) Fiction held a curious place in the estimation of these early Americans. In this, as in my other areas, they earned the sobriquet "people of paradox." On the one hand, authorities execrated fiction as something which rotted the brain and led readers into insanity, vice, and perhaps the proverbial fate worse than death. Schoolchildren learned to blame virtually every vice known to man on fiction, and wrote essays condemning the practice (while they simultaneously devoured the fluff on the sly).

A good example of this attitude can be seen in Susan Warner's diary. Once the young authoress stood up by the gas light late to read *The Initials*, but "got into bed sorry and sorry for my indulgence and wrong doing." Another time she read *Helen* before breakfast and repented: "oh, how wretched it is to do so; I hate it. And yet scarcely struggle against it." (Quoted in Helen Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, c1956), p. 5.) Perhaps, as Helen Papashvily has observed, "because the temptation was so great and so constant, and the gratification so easy and so delightful, novel reading came to be one of the great battlegrounds of conscience in the nineteenth century." (Ibid.)

Education levels stunted by the frontier and time swallowed up by the struggle for survival permitted little in the way of a reading (as opposed to literate) public to develop early in America. But by the early 1800s, the story had changed. "Common school" education became common indeed, and Americans became an amazingly literate people. They quickly read the latest pieces of fiction purloined from English presses without benefit of copyright, and created a market for their own ("inferior") authors. Democratization struck the reading public as it struck other parts of society. The Bible and other "religious" works gave place to other writings. "High brow" authors could well wring their hands at the lack of attention paid their profusions; the public wanted more "common" stuff. If nothing else, the dates on the novels list (see Appendix) illustrate the rising educational levels and the development of leisure in at least a portion of the country. (See an article on the book trade in Missouri which I haven't been able to find yet.)

Because of the tension between its reputation and its desirability, fiction took on a certain moralistic tone as protective coloration. It purported to be true, and virtuous; America's overall bestseller for half a century, *Charlotte Temple*, bears the subtitle *A Tale of Truth*. In succession, pre-Civil War American authors promised their readers verisimilitude. Whether or not they kept their promise depends upon the reader's acceptance of the truthfulness of the scenes, or the setting, or the plot. (See Arthur Mizener, *The Sense of Life in the Modern Novel* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964), pp. 107-8, 110-111, 115-6 especially, for the argument that American novels did indeed keep this promise. See also Marius Bewley's *The Eccentric Design* and *The Complex Fate*, especially the

former.) For their contemporary readers, the claim misled, though modern readers find the stories more “true,” since they have come to accept a different definition of fiction as “truth.”

Of early fiction’s claim to virtue, there can be no doubt. Most bestselling antebellum fiction exudes virtue from every page. Around the plot, behind every word, lurks an air of piety. This moralistic tone reflects the Victorian age in part; it honors the “public” religion of an earlier age, when without equivocation some things were right, others wrong. It mirrors the “Sir Walter Scott Disease” of Mark Twain’s coining, and presages the “Gilded Age” he also named. In an era so given to Biblical allusions, with those allusions coming from the King James Version, the tone is more natural than assumed.

The pervasiveness of religious themes and allusions makes for one observation at the beginning. Only two of the novels under consideration have overt religious themes: *Annals of the Disclosures* (1836) and *Prince of the House of David* (1855). The first is an anti-Catholic diatribe, the second a telling of the Christ story. Aside from these two works, none overtly pushes a religious theme. But morality seeps from the pages of all the rest. Much of the story I seek comes from these other “non-religious” pieces of fiction.

This project attempts to make some sense of the panoply of religious themes and portraits present in early American fiction, and to present a composite picture. When I first conceived this topic, I wondered how religion had been portrayed in antebellum American literature. The subject started as an idle “I wonder...” I had read one of Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales (*Last of the Mohicans*) in graduate school. On the back cover, I made four notes. One of them was “religion.” As I thought about this seminar, I considered the conception of religion fostered by American authors of popular fiction and the impact their religious views would have had on their readers. I therefore sought the first so that I could speculate on the second with some reasonableness.

Involved in the project are some basic problems. In one sense, they come from literary criticism; in another they arise from the historian’s search for evidence and the necessity for analyzing and weighing that evidence. First, to what extent are authors portraying their world? Second, are they reflecting or molding public opinion? When Robert Penn Warren wrote that the facts of *World Enough and Time* were not strictly followed, but that he meant the “world” to be right, he addressed the first question. (ALS Robert Penn Warren to Ray Granade, 12 August 1972.) Authors argue about the second, and a vast literature of debate can unfold before the interested researcher. For my purposes, the answer to the second is immaterial, so long as the authors accurately portray the milieu.

A more significant problem to my mind is that of “reading into” the work something which springs from the present milieu, and which the author did not or could not have meant. Speculating on Marxist overtones in *Charlotte Temple*, for example, is absurd. Once again the researcher is pressed by the fact that he cannot KNOW what the author had in mind, if anything. Conjecture and plausibility are the researcher’s only recourse. Knowledge of the milieu should aid in deciphering what the words say, what they mean, and what they COULD HAVE meant. Inference—plausible inference—is fair game.

My background assumptions are these. Bestselling fiction should best lead me to what I want to find. Whether the author leads or follows, the availability of the work to large numbers of readers suggests its impact. To that end, I selected a list of twenty-three popular novels—bestsellers according to the best estimates I could find (primarily in James David Hart’s *The Popular Book: A History of America’s Literary Taste* (New York, 1950) and Frank Luther Motts’ *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Bestsellers in the United States* (New York, 1960)). I felt that would give me a representative but manageable sample. Thus I out-of-hand rejected a very promising source of similar (if not the same) information—newspaper and magazine fiction. My rationale for so doing was that its sheer bulk would make it unmanageable for this task, and that I had no way to judge

how many people would have read it. At that point, the question of fiction leading or following opinion could have become significant.

Of the works I chose, five were Cooper's, two were E.D.E.N. Southworth's, and two were vintage Mary Jane Holmes. Seventeen different authors therefore appeared on the list. Chronologically, two come from the 1790s, five from the 1820s, one each from the 1830s and 1840s, and fourteen from the 1850s (including 1860).

Looking at the list before reading the tales, I made some tentative judgments. Obviously the 1820s and 1850s would be well-represented. Therefore I should have to look most closely at the milieu of those decades (without losing the context of the whole era). Second, prior to 1850, men wrote bestsellers: only two of the five authors represented were women (one helped by a man). After that date, only four of the twelve (Hawthorne, Arthur, Ingraham, and Ellis) eschewed dresses. The other eight represented the group Hawthorne characterized in 1855 when he wrote to Emerson that "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash..." (Quoted by Kathryn Weibel in *Mirror, Mirror: Images of Women Reflected in Popular Culture* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1977), p.5.)

Of the roughly two hundred original fiction works published in America between 1789 and 1829, women wrote about a third. Between 1830 and 1850, native authors had 1,150 works of fiction published in America. Women held their own, except for the competition from Ingraham and Arthur, who between them wrote 111 (almost 15%) of the 765 novels which appeared in the 1840s. (Papashvily, pp. 5, 25, 49) Perhaps the best gauge of the influence of women during the era comes from the fact that not only were they making the most of the first profession open to them (outside the oldest, of course) in numbers, but in overall success. Until *Wide, Wide World* replaced it, *Charlotte Temple* stood as the overall bestseller for almost sixty years!

Third, as noted above, most of the bestsellers I chose were "non-religious" in plot. In part that resulted from chance, in part from design. While I wanted representation from the "religious" theme novels, I wanted to assure balance as much as possible in the picture I saw of religion in antebellum literature. I therefore tried to provide diversity in the choices.

With these matters in mind, I began to think of the literary criticism which might already be available. Two of the authors had a considerable critical bibliography already—Cooper and Hawthorne. Within the last decade, the popularity of women's studies has brought a huge amount of scholarship to the "distaff writers" (a statement which must be qualified by noting the dearth of such scholarly work prior to that time). Also within the last decade, the rising interest in "social history" had led historians to legitimize the study of the popular novel as more than "trash lit." and look seriously at what its penners might have been trying to say. A significant amount of secondary material therefore presented itself. The interest in my topic for the post-bellum era, especially the recent past, added more secondary sources for me to peruse, since these investigations would probably deal with themes and problems of organization and interpretation from which I could learn.

My approach initially was to read the books themselves, then review the literature. I wished to bring a fresh mind to the task, and then test my conclusions against those who had gone before. I also decided to read the novels chronologically, in the hopes that I could get some sense of what changes, if any, took place over that half century. As it has unfolded, my approach has changed substantially. To this point, I have read through *The Quaker City*, omitted *Awful Disclosures*, and read *Seth Jones*. The departure came when I couldn't find Maria Monk's masterpiece for quite some time, and wanted to look at the end of the road as a sneak preview. I have also begun looking at the secondary literature, realizing that if I didn't I wouldn't get to. My delving into that mass of material has, as the song says, only just begun.

My proposal listed five questions I wished to investigate through the antebellum popular novel. First, how is religion portrayed? Second, does that portrait change with time, between authors, with genre variations, regionally, or in some fluctuating pattern tied to religious activity (the milieu)? Third, what elements of religion does the fiction treat: minister, services, doctrine, congregational make-up, polity? Fourth, how accurately are the elements portrayed; what accounts for the accuracy or lack thereof? Fifth, do stereotypes occur; if so, what are they, and what do those stereotypes reflect? Some of these questions, or their sub-parts, proved quite easy to manage (at least to this point). Others still defy attempts at answering.

First comes the portrait of religion. I have found this question impossible to answer with an overarching reply. At this point, most of the individual elements are easier to handle than the “big picture.” Generally, the authors divide religion into two distinct categories: “real” religion and “organized” religion. These two categories they deal with implicitly and explicitly.

For explicit treatment of organized religion, I would recommend *Modern Chivalry* and *The Quaker City*. *Modern Chivalry* is a picaresque novel modeled on *Don Quixote*, which has a Jeffersonian ideal (yeoman farmer) and a servant (Irish, then Scot, bog-trotter) meandering about the land in search of first-hand knowledge. The farmer, John Farrago, and the servant, Teague O'Regan (later Duncan) happen upon numerous adventures, which a narrator records. Into the record the narrator places various chapters of “observations.” In this manner, the book deals with organized religion on a fairly positive note. The Captain and the narrator obviously come down on the side of the honest practitioners of organized religion, and mouth disparaging remarks about hypocrisy. But overall the tone is positive.

The Quaker City tells another story. Its subtitle (*A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery and Crime*), rightly warns readers to be prepared. The plot involves the story of a libertines' seduction of an innocent girl and consequences of that action. In carrying this involved plot through numerous twists, including four major sub-plots, George Lippard paints a dark picture. Monk Hall is a former religious house which has been converted to a libertine mansion in which all forms of vice hold sway. Nightly, the new “monks” commit all the seven deadly sins. The story covers four days and three nights in 494 large, small-print pages. Virtually all action occurs at night and in the deeper dark of the old mansion. My copy appropriately had a black cover. If smoke could fall instead of rise, Lippard would have used it. One of the libertines is a minister, and the whole portrait of organized religion matches that of the book's tone and color. The best analogy is that of a photographic negative, a reverse image.

Explicitly, Cooper and Rowson both use organized religion in their presentation. Cooper neglects religion in his first two novels, except to depict likewise well-meaning and ineffectual chaplains in *The Spy* and *The Pilot*. In the *Pioneers*, he presents a rather dim view of organized religion. Primarily the reader finds the portrait of something over which men argue—especially the building for the meetinghouse. Organized religion is something with which to trick others into joining you (agreeing with you). In the *Last of the Mobicans*, he presents a similarly ambivalent if not negative picture. The major symbol of organized religion is an Anglican singing master who, though strange and awkward, is a positive (though minor) character. *The Prairie* has no representative of organized religion directly, though through the eyes of one (Protestant) character and the narrator we see a Catholic priest. Though pious (and holy at the story's genesis), he cannot help dissolving into superstition and playing on the lack of sophistication among his parishioners and poisoning them against the young Protestant. Organized religion does not appear explicitly in *Seth Jones* until the end, when a minister appears for the wedding.

In most of these books, especially *Modern Chivalry* and *Seth Jones*, the author specifically identifies which church is under consideration. Brackenridge deals with Presbyterians and Catholics through his servants, whom he sets up as archetypes. His greatest respect obviously goes

to the Quakers, who gain the most sympathetic treatment of all. Ellis's minister is a Methodist, and the Episcopal Church inhabits Cooper's fiction.

Overall, the explicit treatment of organized religion in antebellum popular fiction ranges between ambivalent and negative. The greatest negatives are that religion is ineffectual, however well-meaning, and that it suffers from a lack of focus upon real (social) issues. Perhaps Lippard best summarizes this position when as narrator he laments religion's neglect of Philadelphia's needy, while pious worry about clothing and sending Bibles to those on foreign shores—or fighting the Pope and trying to keep him out of the Mississippi Valley!

Implicitly, a number of general religious themes run through all the novels so far. One common theme among antebellum novelists is a concern over a tension between head and heart, between feeling and emotion, between knowledge and faith. Without exception, the authors prefer balance between the two. The argument takes place over where and how one gets the knowledge which makes the faith possible. Charlotte Temple falls because she trusts her emotions—but only because those emotions are uninformed. Rowson emphasizes that informed emotions, or immature ones guided by someone who has balance already (friend, mother, husband), are fine. Her best example is a minor character, Mrs. Beauchamp, whose good instincts are of course ratified by her husband. She serves (intermittently) as the friend Charlotte's pious mother prays that her daughter will have. Brackenridge constantly inveighs against the uninformed passions of Teague and of the misled masses.

Cooper's argument developed from his *Spy* to *The Prairie*. Harvey Birch, the spy, has balance as the legacy of his father (who gained his through the trial and error of bitter experience). The pilot, "Mr. Gray," lacks balance, and hence fails. Then there's Natty Bumppo—the Leatherstocking, Hawkeye, the Deerslayer, or just Natty—central figure of the Leatherstocking series. Natty has balance, because he has learned from close association with nature over a long time. None around him have it. Those who might be instructed by nature either die too soon (Uncas) or don't have the right "gift" (a concept from *Mobicans* and *Prairie*).

Lippard's central character, Byrnewood Arlington, is instructed by one who has "come up the hard way," Luke Harvey. Harvey, the man of knowledge and disguises, does what he can for the younger man. But eventually, Arlington gains his balance through the same experiential school. Even in *Seth Jones*, the hero has learned experientially from nature. Styling himself "Seth Jones of New Hampshire," the disguised Eugene Morton has gained his balance through adversity.

The thrust of the writers' argument seems to be that balance makes one fully human, and therefore most nearly divine. That balance is revealed (or discovered, for "natural religion" has made some inroads). Cooper, staunch Episcopalian that he was, seems especially susceptible to this (For a brief introduction, see Arnold Smithline, *Natural Religion in American Literature* (New Haven, 1966), who does not deal with novelists at all.) in a variety of ways. None point to Biblical inspiration. They opt for direct revelation or revelation through human or natural intermediaries.

The second theme is that of Providential oversight. Rowson expressed the concept clearly, for she has poor Charlotte come to the end, through trials and abandonment, to be cared for. The heroine dies only after her father has made his appearance so that she can die peacefully, a sudden beam of joy flashing across her face and her eyes raised to heaven. Ellis refers several times to "important acts," which "seem to show that an all-wise Ruler orders them to suit his purposes, and to bring about good in the end." (p. 9.) When one of the heroines, Ina, finds herself in danger of "a fate from the sensuous captors far worse than death itself," she looks heavenward. "In the future," Ellis piously intones, "there was but one Hand that could sustain and safely deliver them, and to that One she looked for deliverance." (p. 45.)

Brackenridge, the “misfit” of the novels from the point of plot, still manages to get Providence into the picture, though not as heavy-handedly. References there come though “observations,” which don’t intrude on the action, such as it is. Providential oversight likewise appears in *The Quaker City*, but again not in obvious dress. (I am tempted to say that only the hand of Providence could guide a reader through the intricacies of Lippard’s plot, but will abstain.) Lippard uses it mainly to provide miraculous escapes from the many dangers which overshadow his characters, and to remind readers that there is a God, despite his characters’ assertions to the contrary. Cooper laces his novels with Providence, but, like Brackenridge, avoids heavy-handedness. Above all action looms the sense that Providence controls. As the *Pilot’s* bo’sun, Long Tom Coffin, faces the storm which destroys his beloved ship “Ariel,” cries, “God’s will be done with me!” (p. 149.)

Providence as a theme is real, but seems to appear primarily when the author lacks the skill to resolve some plot problem, or in an obligatory “nod to God” (especially in Ellis). The trouble with relying too heavily on Providence is the dilemma it poses for the author. If indeed Providence controls, then how does one maintain a sense of involvement and struggle? The device for heroic action disappears in any meaningful sense. For writers standing on the side of good as these do, their characters can simply adopt a fatalistic stance and wait for Providence’s hand. Indeed, that is precisely what Charlotte Temple does, which is why she suffers outraged cries from women’s studies critics, who prefer action to waiting for Providence to right wrongs. The worst problem, of course, is that the American myth of individualism precludes such a stance. None of the novelists successfully handle this dilemma.

The two themes which seem strongest in the antebellum novels are in reality twins—or perhaps more correctly a Janus-complex. The first of these two is that of order and place; the second is public responsibility. The second flows from the first, and involves group responsibility. It reflects the myth of Americans as the new “chosen people,” the “covenanted community” of the Puritans and of Hawthorne. (See especially Horton Davies, *A Mirror of the Ministry in Modern Novels* (Freeport, NY, 1970 reprint of 1952 edition), p11.) Religion implies a social responsibility, one which at least in part is reflected in the question of who instructs the emotions. Rowson clearly argues for friends in that role, though the mother seems most applicable in the novel (train up a child in the way he should go....). Indeed, the issue of filial piety, which rears its head so vigorously in *Charlotte Temple* and *The Quaker City*—in all these novels in fact—is but one aspect of the social responsibility issue. Poor Charlotte laments that she fell because she neglected her responsibility to her parents. On her deathbed, she joins the minister “ferently in the pious office, frequently mentioning her ingratitude to her parents as what lay most heavy at her heart.” (p. 157.) The truly innocent maid in *The Quaker City*, Mary Arlington, likewise feels pangs at her falling from filial piety by betraying her parents’ love—she keeps a secret from them. When she is raped, her thought is to leave forever. Better her parents think her lost than face the shame of her “fate worse....” Her brother justifies killing her seducer, the libertine Gusty Lorrimer, when he pleads guilty at his murder trial: he was merely defending his sister’s honor. Since the libertine would not marry her, he must die. The jury, of course, agreed.

Cooper points to the same moral responsibility in each of his novels. Most often in Cooper the responsibility rests on at least one female in every story. But the network of social obligations lies on grandchildren, as when in *The Pioneers* he has the grandchild “Oliver Edwards” (Edward Effingham) caring for his ancestor. In each of the Leatherstocking stories, it extends to a friend—Natty Bumppo. The scout involves himself in the affairs of others in a caring role because he must. It is the gift of Christian (read “responsible and white”) men.

The theme of public responsibility and the resulting question “who is my neighbor?” implies an understanding of the order of the universe. Only when one has discovered one’s place will one

then see one's responsibility in the scheme. That sense of place is well set out in E.M.W. Tillyard's excellent little book *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Tillyard's carefully-delineated world picture comes to the antebellum novels in direct lineal descent. That world picture, embodied in Anglicanism and its prayer book and hymnody (like "All Things Bright and Beautiful") and the King James Version of the Bible, became replicated in the New World. When one adds to this the vision of the Blind Poet in "Paradise Lost" and the regimen of Fox's *Book of Martyrs* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, the case for order is complete.

Order and authority, as promulgated by religion, help define religion in the novels. For the novelists, problems come when people refuse to be who (what) they should. Charlotte Temple sought, with the aid of her wicked French teacher, La Rue, to go outside her place in society. The heroines who fall to seduction generally do so for that reason. Lippard makes that quite clear when he has Dora Livingstone sell herself for ambition. Cooper's Anglicanism/Episcopalianism partakes of that covenant. Part of the concept of gifts is that one must be what one's gifts make one. To go outside those gifts is to sin.

Brackenridge most overtly pursues the theme of order toward the end of *Modern Chivalry*. There he has the Captain encounter a tax revolt. As was his wont, Farrago waxes logical with the crowd. When his master fails, the Presbyterian servant, Duncan, is moved to a different approach. He upbraids the outraged people who stand round the Liberty Pole: "Did ye never read in the Bible, that rebellion is warse than witchcraft?" (p. 315.) Such a sense of order, authority, and place are especially important to Brackenridge and Cooper. As the era progresses, emphasis on those virtues decreases. Ellis presents little if any of the flavor.

Another common element, though I would not class it as a theme, lies in the conception of Christianity as the only real religion. Others are shams. Of all the novelists, only Cooper and Lippard seem to consent to the idea that religion exists outside Christianity, and Cooper does so mainly toward the end of his story (*Mohicans* and *Prairie*). In *The Pioneers*, he has Natty in a graveyard scene proclaim that while the red and white man worship different gods, they seek the same end, and will be in heaven together. He evidently shied away from that position later, for while he identifies the Indian god with that of the Christians, he presents the belief that a clear difference exists. Lippard's sense of other religions seems equally ambivalent, as he presents a generally favorable picture of Ravoni's sect, only to paint that picture in patent Gospel tints and hues. Both end outside the pale.

The Christianity which the novelists present is one linked with nation and race. Their definitions of Christian are socially oriented. The two best examples of this are Cooper and Brackenridge, though Ellis does the same without being as explicit. In Ellis, Indians are identified with the devil. Teague constantly observes that this or that is Christian when he means "civilized." Brackenridge goes along with the idea, but introduces a caveat. Duncan and Teague are civilized, but only partially. While they are Christians, they haven't reached the height of development to be truly Christian. They are superstitious and argumentative about their religion, almost coming to blows over their religious differences between themselves, and with strangers. Only the tolerant (Christian, American) Captain has reached the height of civilization and may truly be called a Christian. As if to belabor that point, the author introduces the keeper of the county workhouse, in which Teague labors for a brief time. Teague observes that though the overseer regularly lashes recalcitrants and puts all to work at despicable chores like picking oakum, he is an American, and therefore a "Christian gentleman."

The generally religious atmosphere shows up in two other areas. In these early novels, as in much of early American society, characters' names contain part of their meaning to the story development. Thus Cooper's Anglican singing master's name is David (Psalmist) Gamut (octave). Charlotte Temple (God's dwelling place and therefore a holy place of innocence—know ye not that

your body....) is betrayed by the French woman known as La Rue (street, feminine noun in the original language—add the last part of the name for yourself). National pride enters here too. Towson was born in England, and has the always-suspect and usually hostile French betraying English virtue the way Paris always does. Lippard's holy innocent is Mary Arlington. In case the reader might miss the connection, Lippard reminds us that Jesus's mother bore the same name. Other Lippard characters likewise have Biblically- or morally-significant names. Byrnewood, Mary's brother, goes through torment to achieve his balance, and figuratively burns. Devil-Bug keeps the door of Monk Hall, and the man who keeps everyone straight and is the real hero Luke (the physician) Harvey (a doubly healing name). In a world still governed by fire, readers would have immediately identified Lippard's F.A.T. Pyne with "lighter" wood, catching easily and burning quickly and hotly because of its resin content.

The other general area of religious "atmosphere" stands in the numerous Biblical allusions which occur. My hunch at this point is that the Old Testament stories have the edge. Noah, David, Moses, and Absalom all appear. Allusions to early Christian church development likewise appear; in the terms anchorite and senobite, for example. In expressing themselves, characters take on the intonations of various passages, as when Charlotte spurns Belcour's offer to take her to (corrupt) New York society. Though the words differ, the "scan" calls to mind the Song of Ruth, as does the import. (See p. 135.)

In short, religion seeps from the pages of all these novels. The picture they present of religion is generally positive. They nevertheless execrate hypocrisy and most of the elements of organized religion. Those elements form the next part of the examination.

The elements of religion under consideration are groupings, leadership, congregations, services, doctrine, and polity. As elements, their presence is overt. The most general of the collection is that of grouping. Call them churches or sects, the division of religion into groups of differing believers occupies a prominent place in several of the books. Ellis mentions the matter only by identifying the minister who performs the weddings as a Methodist. In Rowson, everyone presumably shares the same religion, though she does not identify which one. It is high church, probably Anglican. No one seems particular about which religion the minister represents, and he serves only the function of easing Charlotte's conscience and burying her.

Brackenridge deals with the matter extensively. He presents Presbyterians, Catholics, astrologers, witches, spiritualists (conjurers), Anglicans, "come-outers," and Quakers. Spiritualists (doubly honest in admitting inability to perform a deed, and not taking money when good results without their real intervention) and Quakers (compassionate and more interested in true piety than forms of worship) come off best. Brackenridge has the narrator observe, for example, that Duncan's extremism in religion comes from insufficient knowledge. He didn't know "that saying grace at victuals is a matter of form, more than of faith; and that for this reason, some Christian sects, particularly the people called Quakers, omit it altogether." (p.286.)

Cooper's division is more between high and low church, though he has the housekeeper in *The Pioneers* (Remarkable Pettibone) speak of Quakers, and enumerate the "standing orders" (those who did not kneel during the service to pray) as Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists. The Moravians are blessed for their missionary efforts; though their work with Chingachgook produced only questionable results (it was against his gifts).

Lippard probably most systematically, clearly, and interestingly portrays church groupings. Central to the story are an astrologer whose foretelling comes true; a Jew, whose actions are marked by all the evil and avarice expected of his "race;" a minister whose Patent Gospel is a sham carried only by his charisma; and the Wandering Jew (Ravoni, the hypnotist, the sorcerer), who starts a sect. For someone interested in the portrayal of "outsiders," Lippard's book is the ticket "as they say in domestic French." In fact, the "mainline" religions receive short shrift. Lippard summarily

castigates them for their lack of attention to the domestic poor, and blames them for the popularity of other groups. Lippard treats Ravoni the most sympathetically, for he puts speeches into the old man's mouth about a new religion of man's goodness. The evil lies in its emphasis on man, and the worship of the founder, a man, who is usurping God's place. Also evident in Lippard's work is a strongly millennial tone, though he ascribes it to no particular group. Devil-Bug receives a stirring vision of the apocalypse. Lippard, like Cooper, mentions Hinduism and Mohammedism, but only in derision (multiple wives and unchristian beliefs).

The next element of religion in the novels is the leader—usually the minister. Ministers are portrayed in several basic ways. First, antebellum authors treated some ministers as jovial ineffectuals. Ellis's Methodist minister is not particularly effective. He only appears when summoned for the wedding, and proves his efficacy best in this state-sanctioned function and in his ability to enjoy the post nuptial festivities. He joins the story-telling, imbibes the cider, and then "with a sly look" asks one of the ladies to dance. (p. 95.) Cooper's chaplains in *The Pilot* and *The Spy* are similarly nice but ineffectual men. In *The Spy*, Harvey Birch disguises himself as a parson, whose lack of abilities is not remarked among the soldiers—it's quite evidently too common. As noted before, the parson in *Charlotte Temple* is a nice but ineffectual man, who wanders in and wanders out again, serving no real function except to satisfy custom. Brackenridge damns with faint praise, when in his introduction he notes that his book is one without thought, and hence especially useful "to young men of light minds intended for the bar or pulpit." He is offering "to all weak and visionary people" something to read "without the trouble of thinking." (pp. 26-7. In one sense, Ann Douglas's argument in her *Feminization of American Culture* attracts me, for here the clergy obviously possess stereotypically feminine traits.)

Oftentimes the minister is not nice and ineffective, but malevolent to some degree. Cooper has his chaplain in *The Pilot* fail at changing his charges, and even begin to ape them. He retires from the sea "in time to retrieve his character." (p.222.) The most malevolent of course, is Reverend F.A.T. Pyne, "Principle Free Believer and True Repenter," head of the American Paten Gospel. Pyne is one of Lippard's Monks, a carouser who makes up tales of woe in order to con money from unsuspecting "gulls," and a seducer who has "fathered" a young girl for fifteen years in order to blackmail the girl's real father and then "have his way with her." Pyne is not even outdone by the malevolence of Ravoni, perhaps because the latter is not "ordained."

Interestingly enough, the minister is not portrayed as a buffoon in any of these novels. Nonetheless the portrait is not flattering, and in no sense is there any real saving grace for the minister. Nice but ineffectual obviously puts the minister with the forces of evil in the same sense that Edwin O'Conner's *The Edge of Sadness* priest winds up realizing that he has harmed by not actively helping his parishioners. So the minister in the antebellum novel comes off poorly indeed.

None of the novels portray an active congregation. In a few instances, we see congregations in the midst of communal devotions. None of them is a very pretty sight. Cooper's congregation in *The Pioneers* is mainly interested in the show rather than the content of the minister's sermon. How long he preaches concerns them mightily. The Catholic parishioners of *The Prairie* come off no better. They are superstitious and shallow in their devotions, missing entirely the purpose of worship. The congregation which Pyne shepherds is carried away with his presentation, raving to save the heathen abroad and keep America Protestant, relying on Pyne to distribute the money they give him rather than actively seeking Christian involvement for themselves. Most are elderly, but dupes come in all ages and sizes.

The dearth of information on services is almost matched by that on doctrine. Characters explicitly mouth doctrinal statements only rarely. *Seth Jones* sees one character aver his sinful nature, for example. But in most cases the reader must infer doctrine from the story. Brackenridge does the most with doctrine, for he interspersed several sermons with his account of those who preach

them. In one instance, for example, one group is trying to decide which of two men is the real preacher. The Captain suggest a test of ability. The result—two sermons. One is doctrinal, the other not. But at least some doctrine emerges. By and large, the doctrine expressed in the novels is that of identification between Christian and civilized, and Christian and American (see above). The chief doctrinal characteristic in the novels, like that of Americans in general (See Baird and Schaff.), is the lack of doctrinal subtleties. Most of them, however, are not Calvinist in tone (at least so far—a surprise to me). They emphasize the ability of humans to deal with their own problems, and the basic goodness which lies beneath the world's evil. The heroines, for example, are innocent, not evil in their basic natures.

Of church polity as presented in the novels, little can be said beyond the emphasis on its democratic nature. When Cooper has the church being built in *The Pioneers*, the decision rests with the people as to what form it should take, and what minister should inhabit the pulpit. They clearly are to govern the church “from the ground up.” Lippard emphasizes the necessity of telling people what they want to hear, since they pay the bills and control the church. In keeping with the dim view of the minister, one would expect churches to be controlled by “trimmers,” who would select their course with more interest in that course's practical effects on their careers than on the fitness of the matter under consideration. One's expectations would be fulfilled.

Like the matters of specifics, the question of changes in these antebellum novels can be quickly answered. Regional changes cannot be marked, for, so far, all the novels have been written by northerners. Rowson lived in New York; Brackenridge in western Pennsylvania; Cooper in New York; Lippard in Pennsylvania; and Ellis, and Ohiona by birth, resided in New Jersey. Changes between authors to this point reveal little, except in the case of the dark Lippard. Genre change (from the seduction novel of Rowson to the adventure novel of Copper to the “urban Gothic” of Lippard to the sensibility novels (to which I haven't gotten yet) to the dime novel of Ellis) is clear. Yet to the point, the authors show remarkably similar general treatment of religion and religious themes. Preliminarily I would postulate that linkage does exist between the treatment of religion and the milieu, though probably not closely, by decades. The treatment I think hinges on the larger context (Romantic, Victorian), though emphasis on groups like those in Lippard would certainly come closer to the Civil War than to the Revolution.

In the question of stereotypes, I see developing, at least to this point, the same stereotypes I expect to find explicated in the post-Civil War era. This is gut reaction rather than research, based on my own rather spotty reading in modern American popular fiction. Perhaps the treatment of the minister is the best example, as noted above.

In conclusion, religion is portrayed as important and significant by antebellum American popular novels. It has certain social importance. It even has some potential to change the world. But practitioners on both sides of the pulpit are handled in a disparaging fashion, though with more or less compassion (speaking the truth in love, perhaps). The overall portrait is high on religion, but low on its practice. Perhaps the most damning evidence of the attitude toward religion as it is normally practiced lies in the use of religious words and phrases to sear and cajole, to manipulate opponents and lull them into unsuspecting “security” while intending them harm all the while. The final picture is a dark one, for the promise is blighted by the very ones entrusted with the vision. The moral message is obscured.

BESTSELLERS—1789-1860

FICTION

- Susanna Haswell Rowson—*Charlotte Temple* (1791)
Hugh Henry Brackenridge—*Modern Chivalry* (1792)
James Fenimore Cooper—*The Spy* (1821)
_____—*The Pilot* (1823)
_____—*The Pioneers* (1823)
_____—*The Last of the Mohicans* (1826)
_____—*The Prairie* (1827)
Maria Monk (& Gerald Grob)—*Anful Disclosures* (1836)
George Lippard—*The Monks of Monk Hall (The Quaker City)* (1844)
Nathaniel Hawthorne—*The Scarlet Letter* (1850)
Susan Bogert Warner (Elizabeth Wetherell, pseu.)—*The Wide, Wide World* (1850)
E.D.E.N (Emma Dorothy Eliza Nevitte) Southworth—*The Curse of Clifton* (1852)
Harriet Beecher Stowe—*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)
Maria Susanna Cummins—*The Lamplighter* (1854)
Mary Jane Hawes Holmes—*Tempest and Sunshine* (1854)
Timothy Shay Arthur—*Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1854)
Joseph Holt Ingraham—*The Prince of the House of David* (1855)
Mary Jane Hawes Holmes—*Lena Rivers* (1856)
Augusta Jane Evans Wilson—*Benlah* (1859)
E.D.E.N. Southworth—*The Hidden Hand* (1859)
Edward Sylvester Ellis—*Seth Jones* (1860)
Miriam Coles (Mrs. S. S.) Harris—*Rutledge* (1860)
Ann Sophia Winterbotton Stephens—*Malaeska* (1860)