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Pragmatism and the Gift:
Toward a Charismology of Dynamic Gifts in American Literature and Religion

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in English

by

Tae Sung

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Steven Mailloux, Chair
Professor John H. Smith
Professor Brook Thomas

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Pragmatism and the Gift:

Toward a Charismology of Dynamic Gifts in American Literature and Religion

By

Tae Sung

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Irvine 2014

Professor Steven Mailloux, Chair

This dissertation proposes a charismological reading of dynamic gifts in American culture, developing a critical yet constructive theory of gifts that can then be applied to a broad range of American writers and texts. By drawing on the work of literary pragmatists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James, who intentionally situate themselves in intermediary positions between religion and secularism, I offer a more nuanced approach to the so-called “religious turn” in critical theory and literary studies. The aim of this project is to contribute to recent debates about theories of the gift and, in so doing, contributes to the fields of American literature and religion, both of which are all too often divided by narratives of secularization or an aggressive religious return. Following Jeffrey Stout’s example in *Democracy and Tradition* and his definition of democratic piety as the proper acknowledgement of the sources of our existence and progress through life, this charismological approach to gift-theories is an attempt to engage the dynamic spiritual and secular sources that are inextricably part of American

culture. As Heidegger did with the question of being, rather than focus on particular gifts as objects of circulation in culture, I am interested in a more fundamental flow of dynamic power that comes from inspirational gifts that are difficult to analyze as mere objects of exchange. By shifting the interpretive framework away from what Derrida called an “economy of exchange,” which cannot but result in the annulment of the gift through debt and obligation, this approach offers an alternative, non-economic framework that interprets what I call “dynamic gifts” as sources of power, agency, and inspiration.

CHAPTER 1

“A Gospel of Power”

Toward A Charismological Framework for Dynamic Gifts

Thou sorrow, venom Elfe.
Is this thy play,
To spin a web out of thyselfe
To catch a Fly?
For Why?
[...]

To tangle Adams race
In's stratigems
To their Destructions, spoil'd, made base
By venom things
Damn'd Sins.

But mighty, Gracious Lord
Communicate
Thy Grace to breake the Cord, afford
Us Glorys Gate
And State.¹

A gospel of power [...] A gospel of courage, practical, an optimistic, an *American* gospel! Away with fear! Daring! Forward! A leap in the dark! Away with doubt! Every hundred dollar bill of theory must be convertible into the small change of particular fact, of desirable achievements! Away with metaphysics! Welcome to religions!²

¹ Edward Taylor (1642?-1729), from “Upon a Spider Catching a Fly.” The title of this chapter comes from a phrase early in John Winthrop’s sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630).

² From *The Failure (Un Uomo Finito)*, written by the Italian pragmatist Giovanni Papini. Quoted in Richardson’s *William James*, 479; italics in original.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James were obsessed with sources of individual empowerment and agency. Power is surely one of their great shared themes.³ They thought and wrote about it and sought earnestly always for more. While abroad in 1868 to recover from one of his bouts of depression, James wrote to a friend, “Emerson speaks of a plus quantity being essential to every hero—that is a feeling of superiority to all circumstances however solemn, a carelessness, a dash of recklessness, which implies a certain disrespect for every thing but one’s own will—(I don’t father this amplification on Emerson) and men who have this buoyancy of will may doubtless go far with it.”⁴ The dash and disrespect are established motifs in the Emersonian tradition of non-conformity, but the plus or what James calls elsewhere “the sense of the more” is part of a longer American preoccupation with dynamic sources of power. On precisely this point, as Perry Miller suggested, can Jonathan Edwards be considered a predecessor.⁵ What Miller and other scholars have not called attention to, however, is the way both Emerson and James, not unlike Edwards’s references to the Holy Spirit, often described *the experience of power as the reception of a gift*. The language of power and gift are rhetorically associated in important ways for the study of American literature, philosophy, and religion. This “gospel of power,” as the Italian pragmatist Giovanni Papini called it, is the subject of this study.

³ Michael Lopez’s *Emerson and Power* has made the decisive case for thinking about Emerson, alongside Nietzsche and James, on the topic of power.

⁴ Quoted in Richardson’s *William James*, 154.

⁵ In “From Edwards to Emerson,” Miller argues there are affinities between these two important figures that point to “certain basic continuities that persist in a culture” (185). Miller’s argument has been criticized mainly for the singularity of his notion of culture and the New England mind. While I agree with such criticisms, I want to revisit what I consider his more important thesis of the pietism and mysticism that runs through American cultural history.

Despite strong interest among recent theorists in “the gift,” it has yet to become a major topic in American cultural studies.⁶ My hope is to make a small but significant contribution toward this goal. American culture has always reflected an anxiety about gifts that goes back to the beginnings of European settlement in the New World. From Columbus’s attempt to conquer Native Americans through exchange of gifts to Mitt Romney’s suggestion that President Obama won the 2012 elections “through extraordinary financial gifts from the government,” many are the examples pointing to a general suspicion that gift-exchange results in obligations and forms of indebtedness that can ultimately undermine principles of self-reliance, democracy, and justice.⁷ In this view, power is exercised through the mask of benevolent gifts. This suspicion can also be found at the center of modern theories of the gift, which go back to Marcel Mauss’s classic 1950 essay and have since had important interdisciplinary implications across philosophy, theology, law, and the social sciences.⁸ In response to Mauss’s anthropological work, which relied in no small part on Frank Boas’s observations of

⁶ The notable exception is Hildegard Hoeller’s *From Gift to Commodity*, which I will examine further in chapter 4.

⁷ Gift-exchange plays a central role from the very beginning of *The Diario of Christopher Columbus*. In his first encounter on October 11, 1492, for example, Columbus writes, “I, he says, in order that they would be friendly to us—because I recognized that they were people who would be better freed [from error] and converted to the Holy Faith by love than by force—to some of them I gave red caps, and glass beads which they put on their chests, and many other things of small value, in which they took so much pleasure and became so much our friends that it was a marvel” (Mulford 30). Mitt Romney’s comments were made in a conversation with donors on November 14, 2012 that was later leaked to ABC News: “What the president, president’s campaign did was focus on certain members of his base coalition, give them extraordinary financial gifts from the government, and then work very aggressively to turn them out to vote. And that strategy worked” (<http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video/mitt-romney-comments-president-obamas-win-2012-election-17722041>).

⁸ For an overview of recent gift-theories, see Schrift, *The Logic of the Gift*; Hyland, *Gifts: A Study in Comparative Law*; Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*; Sykes, *Arguing with Anthropology*; Leithart, *Gratitude: An Intellectual History*.

North American tribes, poststructural philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and postsecular theologians like John Milbank argue that the gift, at the most fundamental level, is about nothing less than what, how, and why we give to and receive from the other. Despite their different conclusions, they agree that gifts engender some form of obligation and indebtedness. Always inscribed in an “economy of exchange,” every gift is motivated by a prior debt or the expectation of a future return. In the words of the economist Milton Friedman, there is no such thing as a free lunch.

This dissertation develops an alternative way of understanding gifts that historically emerges in the nineteenth century and can theoretically contribute to current debates. My contention is that a close reading of the language of gifts in nineteenth-century American literature, philosophy, and religion not only anticipates many of the problems later identified by theorists, but also presents a way of thinking about gifts that overcomes the problem of debt. One source for this resolution can be found among literary pragmatists, as Richard Poirier called them, who employ a non-economic rhetoric of gifts. In many instances, when Emerson and James refer to gifts, they are talking about dynamic sources of power, agency, and inspiration.⁹ Such *dynamic gifts*, as I will call them, are often rhetorically figured more broadly throughout American literature in a variety of tropes from Christmas presents to objects of human talent, charisma, inspiration, experience, tradition, nature, and even life itself. While each of these can be examined under an analytic framework of exchange, they can also appear

⁹ In a way that emphasizes more of the rhetorical and hermeneutic, I am contributing to what David Kyuman Kim has called “a project of regenerating agency”: “at the core of contemporary quests for agency lie dimensions of the religious and spiritual life, the heart of which is to transcend circumstances and conditions of constraint and limitation of varying kinds” (*Melancholic Freedom*, p. 4).

under a different interpretive framework as dynamic sources that empower individuals to do what is otherwise difficult or impossible. Nature, for example, can be commoditized into economic resources, but figures like Emerson also describe a power from what they call the gifts of nature that exceed the logic of capitalism and technology. Before examining in subsequent chapters how American pragmatists develop this non-economic rhetoric of dynamic gifts, this introduction will first lay out the theoretical, methodological, and historical framework that will guide the rest of the dissertation.

Charismology is a theological term that means the study of spiritual gifts (*charis*, -*mata*). It is a species of pneumatology or the study of the Spirit, which has become one of the most active fields in recent theology. According to some, pneumatology is “the last unexplored theological frontier” and its modern history often extends to philosophical discourses about spirit from Hegel to Derrida.¹⁰ And just as philosophical discourses have become an important part of modern pneumatology, I am recasting the term charismology more broadly to include philosophical and social theories of gift-exchange. I employ it here to examine the language of gifts found especially in the more mystical or pneumatological strains of the literary and religious imagination. While the particular emphasis on gifts may be new, this study is an attempt to extend the work of literary pragmatists such as Poirier, whose concept of “the superfluous” and “the vague” (*Poetry and Pragmatism*) has encouraged others like Giles Gunn to explore how language and literature are associated with James’s notion of the more and what Emerson called “the infinite prospective of being”:

¹⁰ Quoted in Karkkainen, *Pneumatology*, p. 13. See also Work, “Pneumatology”; Welker, “The Spirit in Philosophical, Theological, and Interdisciplinary Perspectives.” For a theological work representative of charismology, see Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*.

In this pragmatist understanding of language, then, the words are there [...] to point to, or, better, to lead toward, insights, intuitions, intimations, situated on the horizon of consciousness that would either be lost if in fact they were named or lack any placement within our current hierarchies of understanding. Thus for pragmatism art is important not because it designates, as in the monumentalist or high canonical view, somewhere to get to, but rather because it suggests, as in a more democratic or populist view, somewhere to depart from. The arts, as Emerson said, are initial, not final. It is what they aim at, not what they achieve, that matters. (“Religion and the Revival of Pragmatism” 413)

Without maintaining a rhetorical and hermeneutic openness to what lies beyond our horizons of consciousness, we may lose access to forms of empowerment and agency that traditionally would have fallen under the theological categories of the Spirit (pneumatology) and its gifts (charismology).

While aiming to contribute more broadly to the field of nineteenth-century American literature, philosophy, and religion, as well as to recent critical gift-theories, this dissertation will focus principally on central figures of pragmatism both then and now. I will examine how Emerson (chapter 2), James (chapter 3), and others from W. E. B. Du Bois to more recent pragmatists (chapter 4) employ a rhetoric of gifts. As we will see especially in the chapters on Emerson and James, their use of this trope both reflects how they translate earlier discourses about the gifts of divine grace and prefigures diverse yet not entirely unrelated movements in the twentieth century from Pentecostalism to Modernism and Existentialism that in one sense can all be described as attempts to open up spiritual or extra-rational dimensions of human agency that

exceed the limits of rational calculation and control. The spirit here refers in its theological and historical versions to dynamic sources of power, agency, and inspiration not generated by instrumental reason alone. Nineteenth-century attempts to open up these dynamic sources beyond the self ultimately have roots in Romanticism in general and more specifically in Schleiermacher and Hegel. But in the context of American revivalisms and awakenings, which were all fundamentally about redefining the nature and function of divine grace, the experience of power becomes rhetorically figured as the reception of gifts. In an important sense that reflects an anxiety about what grace means in the New World, the phenomenology of spirit and a hermeneutics of religious experience are in American culture charismologically figured as the gifts of spirit.¹¹

In other words, this study is meant to be a preliminary contribution to a broader religious history of pneumatology in the United States that can offer a new lens through which to read various literary texts. It is only preliminary because this dissertation examines what I am calling a rhetoric of dynamic gifts in just a few key figures of pragmatism, who nevertheless are especially important for their contribution to both literary and religious history. In their reaction against what historians like Mark Noll and E. Brooks Holifield have identified as a rational evidentialism at the center of theology in America, I am suggesting that Emerson and James participate in something like a pneumatological tradition that includes antinomian and pietist figures from John Cotton and Anne Hutchinson in the seventeenth century to James Marsh and Horace Bushnell in the nineteenth. Not all reacted against rational theology the same way, but in each of

¹¹ Two of the best recent historical overviews of theology in the United States and how the concept of grace played a central role are E. Brooks Holifield's *Theology in America* and Mark Noll's *America's God*.

their reactions can be found a distinct reliance on a language of spirit and gifts as dynamic sources of agency and empowerment. The study of this particular vocabulary of tropes resisting the priority of the rational is what I am calling a charismology.

One point of departure for the study of nineteenth-century charismologies is Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*. In tracing what the subtitle calls the making of the modern self, Taylor examines the various moral frameworks that now compete in the modern world with their older theistic narratives. The Enlightenment and Romanticism in particular have shaped modern identities such that "our cultural life, our self-conceptions, our moral outlooks still operate in the wake of these great events" (393). What we have inherited include certain ideals that are nearly universal in most modern Western societies. Taylor offers three examples: a moral imperative to reduce suffering; the free, self-determining subject; and the ideal of universal justice and benevolence. With regard to our attempts to realize these inherited ideals, the fundamental question Taylor examines is: "What can sustain this continuing drive?"¹² In the older theistic framework, "the orthodox Christian understanding of this universal concern [e.g. justice] is *agape*, or 'charity'; and the answer to the question of what makes it possible is grace [...] But when the commitment to universal concern takes on non-theistic definition, something else has to play the role of grace" (410). Various substitutes for grace include "the clear vision of scientific reason, the Rousseauian or Romantic impulse of nature,

¹² Taylor recognizes other views suspicious of efforts to reach such ideals: "We can take a jaundiced or cynical view of these demands, look on them as a bit of hypocrisy which is built into our way of life, a posture of self-congratulation about which we're not really serious. Or we can look on them in a Nietzschean way, as seriously enough meant, but in fact motivated by envy and self-hatred. Or we can while approving them neutralize them as a distant ideal, an idea of reason never to be integrally realized in this world. Some degree of this latter is probably necessary to keep our balance" (*Sources* 398).

the Kantian good will, [and] Sarastrian goodness” (412). Even in the twentieth century, modernists in continuity with their Romantic predecessors strive to open what Taylor calls “the epiphanic” to sustain their “protest against a world dominated by technology, standardization, the decay of community, mass society, and vulgarization” (456).¹³

Where charismology begins is precisely at this point of examining the sources of grace that empower and sustain us to protest against a rationally dominated world that can close off these sources. I focus specifically on nineteenth-century American culture when the question of grace and its substitutes have had profound implications from the so-called Second Great Awakening and the rise of Transcendentalism to the founding of new religions and the emergence of various reformist and voluntaristic movements. In Taylor’s mind, the various substitutes for grace are secular rivals wherein “a complex interplay arises in which each can be at some moment strengthened by the weakness exposed in the others” (413). Against this agonistic claim about religious and secular rivalry that overshadows much of his argument, Taylor acknowledges elsewhere that “the movement out of theism” can be more gradual as in the case of Romanticism, within which exists a number of intermediate positions (408). His one brief example is Emerson who “hovered on the borders where theism, pantheism, and non-theism all meet.”

Some alternatives to grace certainly do rival each other. But what I am calling a *translation of grace into gifts* focuses on how definitions of grace slide between these intermediate positions and not always in one direction. In other words, translation does

¹³ See Kim’s *Melancholic Freedom* for his reading of Taylor, who offers a theory of the sublime or “epiphanic” to regenerate sources of agency. For two other theorists who examine theories of grace/gifts as sources of power, see Badiou’s *Saint Paul* and Agamben’s *The Time That Remains*.

not *inevitably* result in the slippery slope of substitution. Taylor is right to identify Emerson as a key figure. But he is just one among several important American figures who occupy a variety of intermediate positions that intentionally blur the lines between the secular and the sacred. Because of the particular influence of these figures in American culture, I am partly interested in how they might complicate a secularization narrative that posits an antagonistic rivalry between grace and gifts. By arguing that figures like Emerson or James translate theological terms, I am saying they attempt not so much to replace a theology of grace as to broaden its context. If by secularization we mean simply a rejection of religious commitment and justification, this is not their intent. However much they liberalize orthodox definitions of grace beyond traditional discourses of soteriology to theories of poetry, rhetoric, and hermeneutics, they represent not the disenchantment of religion but its various translations.¹⁴

Taking account of relevant gift-theories, my particular approach to charismology shifts the primary locus from the gift's material circulation in society to its rhetorical articulation in critical and constructive theories of language. Focusing my study in this way provides at least one important distinction. Rather than examining various manifestations of gifts such as particular objects of gratitude or donation, this study takes one step back to what Taylor calls the means of grace or, to borrow Kenneth

¹⁴ In *A Secular Age*, Taylor offers three definitions of secularization: (1) the privatization of religion from the public sphere; (2) the waning of religious belief and practice; (3) the changing conditions of belief that make unbelief possible. The definition I use here is (2), though this will have to be modified later in chapter 3 when I engage more fully with Taylor's use of secularization as (3). For a useful distinction between *secularism* as an ideological move toward disenchantment or substitution of religious belief and *secularization* as the inability to take for granted that all interlocutors share the same religious assumptions, see Stout, chapter 4 "Secularization and Resentment," *Democracy and Tradition*.

Burke's more rhetorical term, the *motivation* of giving.¹⁵ The chief consequence of this shift is an inevitable slippage that will accompany the use of the term gift, a consequence that also reflects the wide range of its philosophical and theological uses. While some attention to a conceptual definition of what a gift is and a historical account of its circulation in culture is still necessary, my primary objective is a rhetorical analysis of how the language of gifts motivates various modes of giving.

The trope of spiritual gifts, as I will define it, signifies an experience of *dunamis* as a source for agency and empowerment (Gr. *dunamis*, possibility, capability, power). Gifts of spirit, or what I call *dynamic gifts*, mediate between sources of power beyond the rational self and certain modes of giving, not all of which are necessarily benevolent. Just as the etymology calls attention to the ironic potential of the gift as poison, we must be attentive to the dual logic (*dissoi logoi*) of spirit as source of both inspiration and madness.¹⁶ Whether seemingly divine or diabolical, the reception of dynamic gifts opens up extra-rational dimensions of empowerment that are generated beyond our conscious ability to calculate and control, even if they can later be subject to instrumentalization. Dynamic gifts mediate this flow of power between what might be called the spirit and the self or what Paul Tillich called "the infinite and finite."¹⁷ Experience of the infinite is

¹⁵ See *The Rhetoric of Motives*. For Burke's discussion of "grace," see *The Rhetoric of Religion*.

¹⁶ According to the *OED*, the word gift in Old English is recorded only in the sense of a payment for a wife or, in its plural form, a wedding. The word is traced to Germanic origin, which signified both dowry and poison.

¹⁷ In *A History of Christian Thought*, Tillich describes a notion of the infinite and finite that originates in the work of Nicholas of Cusa and can be found in figures from Martin Luther to Goethe: "In everything finite the infinite is present, namely, that power which is the creative unity of the universe as a whole. And in the same way the finite is in the infinite as potentiality. In the world the divine is developed; in God the world is enveloped. The finite is in the infinite potentially; the infinite is in the finite actually. They

mediated because the gifts of spirit are never given all at once, but always only partially as they unfold through time and space (i.e. the finite). If spirit then is known by the manifestation of its dynamic gifts, charismology focuses on those gifts that mediate without collapsing the spirit and the self such that a dynamic giving to the other would be impossible were they completely identical. The difference, though sometimes difficult to discern, constitutes an opening and an openness fundamental to the conditional possibility of giving. As we will see in the next chapter, Emerson calls this opening “a golden impossibility” and it is but “a hair’s breadth.”

Another way to describe this mediation between the infinite and finite is to say that charismology examines the dynamic process or flow between experience and language, as long as we agree with Kenneth Burke that language is another mode of action. As already implied, this study is not only phenomenological, but also explicitly rhetorical and hermeneutical. That is, interpretation and persuasion are inextricably tied to the experience and exercise of gifts.¹⁸ In order to speak of the experience of receiving a gift or the gift of experience, there must already be the gift of language and a language of gifts. Gifts are always rhetorically mediated. Without such mediations we would be unable to interpret any act or object of donation. What my reading of Emerson and James will show in the following chapters are the ways they understood language

are within each other. He [Nicholas of Cusa] expresses this in geometrical terms by saying that God, or better, the divine, is the center and periphery of everything” (373). Tillich goes on to state, “Romanticism broke the [neo-] classical balance of the infinite and the finite, by the dynamic power of the infinite which transcends every finite form” (376).

¹⁸ See Mifsud’s article on “Rhetoric as Gift/Giving.” More will be said about the role of language and rhetoric in relation to the gift in chapter 3.

as both receptive (hermeneutical) and productive (rhetorical) means of the gifts of experience.

Here I admit readily the influence of Gadamer's central argument in *Truth and Method* that language is the medium of hermeneutic experience from which truth emerges. Substitute *gift* for Gadamer's *truth*, or rather, speak of the gift of truth or truth emerging like the gift of spirit, and we have something like a "gift and method" in the same sense that Gadamer's own terms are in tension.¹⁹ In other words, the gift is not merely an object that requires a method to reach. Instead, it mediates giver and receiver by pointing to both a here and there or a now and then that otherwise would remain hidden if the gift were methodically analyzed as a material object only. Drawing on Gadamer's theory of language, the reception of a gift is not unlike what he calls "the birth of experience as an event over which no one has control and which is not even determined by the particular weight of this or that observation, but in which everything is co-ordinated in a way that is ultimately incomprehensible. The image captures the

¹⁹ The term gift (*Gabe*) appears three times in *Wahrheit und Methode* and once negatively. The negative reference is in the context of Gadamer's general critique of Romanticism, e.g. the gift of genius (23). The two positive references, however, are significant and suggest that his notion of truth can be extended to a charismological analysis of gifts. The first occurs in his reading of the pietist Oetinger, whose understanding of the *sensus communis* as a kind of "divine, irresistible force" is, Gadamer says, "a gift of God" (*eine Gaben Gottes*), and is contrasted with the *ratio* which "governs itself by rules, often even without God" (26). The second positive use occurs in his critique of Plato: "Nevertheless, it is characteristic of the weakness that Plato recognizes in the logos that he bases his critique of the Sophists' argument not on logic but myth. Just as true opinion is a divine favor and gift [*eine göttliche Gunst und Gabe*], so the search for and recognition of the true logos is no free self-possession of the human mind" (340). In both of these positive references, a gift that mediates the divine and human is contrasted to the rational mastery of an objective gift alien to me (e.g. the given). My sense is that Gadamer is hesitant about using the term gift, even when analyzing the Christian notion of *verbum* and incarnation in part III, because of its tendency to set up subject-object dualisms. But I think it is not too far a stretch to extend Gadamer's careful analysis of art, history, and language to gifts as well.

curious openness in which experience is acquired, suddenly, through this or that feature, unpredictably, and yet not without preparation” (347). The birth or gift of experience is unpredictable and yet not without preparation because without language, the gifts of art or history do not appear. Gifts emerge only in and through language, which is a medium and not a method to reach some fixed objective Gift or Giver. Like the phenomena of artistic representation and historical tradition Gadamer analyzes, the infinite experience or reception of gifts cannot be separated from their finite coming-to-presentation through language: “Here, the given is something made [*Alles Gegebene ist hier hervorgebracht*]” (222). The reception of gifts then is ultimately also a kind of *poiesis*. Gifts are brought out (*hervorgebracht*) in a making through language (*poiesis*).

This notion that a hermeneutical reception of gifts is also a poetic or more generally a rhetorical production—a rhetorical hermeneutics if you will—has significance for the study of literature and religion.²⁰ Not only does each field explicitly thematize various modes of gift-giving as we will see in later chapters, but there is also according to Gadamer a more fundamental if not quite giftedness, then at least a fundamental “givenness” about these two disciplines passed to us through language: “What has come down to us by way of verbal tradition is not left over but given to us [*es wird übergeben*]” (391). It will take Derrida and Marion each in their different ways to

²⁰ My use of the term rhetorical hermeneutics here departs only slightly from Steven Mailloux’s definition as “the use of rhetoric to practice theory by doing history.” Rhetorical hermeneutics, he says, “is the intersection of cultural rhetoric study and rhetorical pragmatism.” Although trying to emphasize Mailloux’s insight on the connection between rhetorical production and hermeneutic reception, my use of the term is closer to his definition of rhetorical pragmatism. See Mailloux, *Disciplinary Identities*.

describe as gift what literary and religious texts give to us.²¹ But what I want to highlight from Gadamer is his emphasis on literature and religion as particularly illustrative of the double-sidedness of experience and language. Literature exists at the borderline position (*der Grenzstellung der Literatur*) where a dialogical and dynamic giving between infinite experience and finite language occurs: “In deciphering and interpreting it, a miracle [*ein Wunder*] takes place,” such that “in the process of understanding them [texts] is the dead trace of meaning transformed back into living meaning” (156).²² What is central about this notion of “the miracle of understanding” is that it goes both ways. What the text gives can only be received in giving ourselves to the process of understanding. Hermeneutics then requires both an interpretive reception and a rhetorical giving.

This is true of not only literature, for Gadamer, but also explicitly the Christian theology of incarnation:

The mystery of the Trinity is mirrored in the miracle of language insofar as the word that is true, because it says what the thing is, is nothing by itself and does not seek to be anything: *nihil de suo habens, sed totum de illa scientia de qua nascitur*. *It has its being in its revealing*. Exactly the same thing is true of the mystery of the Trinity. Here too the important thing is not the earthly appearance of the Redeemer as such, but rather his complete divinity, his consubstantiality

²¹ The famous debate between Derrida and Marion on the gift can be found in Caputo and Scanlon’s *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*. For an excellent study of Derrida’s and Marion’s gift-theories, see Horner’s *Rethinking God as Gift*. Caputo’s *The Prayer and Tears of Jacques Derrida* was one of the first critical examinations of the gift in Derrida.

²² Gadamer goes on to say about this miracle of literature, “This is like nothing that comes down to us from the past” (156). A more charismological translation would have emphasized the excessiveness, the over-supply of texts.

with God. *To grasp the independent personal existence of Christ within the sameness of being* is the task of theology. (420, italics mine)

Although Gadamer does not use the word gift, we must remember that the incarnation is theologically the principle gift-event of God's self-giving.²³ The gift of incarnation, of the divine *logos/verbum* is the mediation, the consubstantiality between two beings contingent upon their revealing. The miracle of understanding is this consubstantiality or, less theologically, a "fusion of horizons" that requires a mutual giving and reception. To grasp *the independent within the sameness of being*, as Gadamer says, is not only the task of theology, but also the more demystified task of hermeneutics in general: "The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning" (292). In this way, the gifts of experience, literary or religious, have their very being in the gift of language, which establishes a commonness that mediates two things without collapsing them together. This kind of gift-mediation conditions the flow of dynamic gifts in two other ways.

Crucial to Gadamer's notion of hermeneutics is that what is given does not result in a loss. Language can never fully exhaust the infinite gifts of experience because experiences do not lose themselves by giving themselves to understanding. To explain this, Gadamer relies again on the incarnation, which draws from the Neoplatonic idea of emanation:

²³ See, for example, the Heideggerian Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* or the Evangelical Episcopalian theologian Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*.

In the process of emanation, that from which something flows, the One, is not deprived or depleted. The same is true of the birth of the Son from the Father, who does not use up anything of himself but takes something to himself. And this is likewise true of the mental emergence that takes place in the process of thought, speaking to oneself. This kind of production is at the same time a total remaining within oneself. (422-423)

Emanation in this sense is not economic. The total remaining within oneself is not maintained by the return of what one gives or its exchange with something else. Rather, what emanates from the One does not deprive or deplete in the first place. This, however, does not mean nothing is given. Something flows. The Son is born. Speech is heard. And dynamic gifts flow precisely in this way as I will argue in more detail in the next chapter. Even if they can later be economized into commodities, their initial reception flows from a non-economic horizon of emanation.

Furthermore, this notion of a dynamic flow modeled on the gift of incarnation releases, according to Gadamer, creative powers that in Nicholas of Cusa ultimately moves beyond the limitations of Neoplatonic emanation:

However Platonic and Neoplatonic this talk of unfolding may sound, in actual fact Nicholas of Cusa has decisively overcome the emanistic schema of the Neoplatonic doctrine of explication. He opposes to it the Christian doctrine of the *verbum*. The word is for him no less than the mind itself, not a diminished or weakened manifestation of it. Knowing this constitutes the superiority of the Christian philosopher over the Platonist. *Accordingly, the multiplicity in which the human mind unfolds itself is not a mere fall from true unity and not a loss of its*

home. Rather, there has to be a positive justification for the finitude of the human mind, however much this finitude remains related to the infinite unity of absolute being. (433)

This positive justification of finitude results in the creative “multiplicity in which the human mind unfolds itself.” Human finitude means there is an “essential inexactness” of all human knowledge that actually opens up an infinite yet not arbitrary number of interpretations. Rather than a negative idea, this inexactness constitutes the very condition for creativity. To put it another way, the finitude of language is precisely what opens up the infinitude of experience. Whatever the objects of interpretation give, whatever are the gifts of experience, they will continue to give as long as the inexactness of language and interpretation mediates their reception.

To emphasize their importance, let me reiterate these points again.

Charismology draws from Gadamer’s hermeneutics in three ways. First, just as truth is mediated by language, language is the medium for the hermeneutic experience of gifts. Second, dynamic gifts circulate not in an economy of exchange, but in a noneconomic horizon of emanation and flow. Third, the inexact and finite reception of gifts results in an infinite flow of dynamic power and creativity.

These three hermeneutic points, however, constitute only a part of my particular charismological approach, each of which can be critically examined from what Derrida has called “the impossibility of the gift” (*Given Time* 16). What underlies Derrida’s argument that the gift cannot appear—in language or any other medium—without disappearing in an economy of exchange is his critique of the metaphysics of *parousia*, as the presence/presents of something given. Derrida resists precisely the fundamental

hermeneutic assumption that something, the being or gift of truth, is brought out (*parousia/hervorgebracht*) from the given (*Gegebene*). There is no gift in the given. For as soon as it appears, its freedom, its purity is annulled by its return in some form, however rudimentary, of economic exchange. Instead, the illusion that there is a gift in the given only results in masking domination, interest, and resentment. Nevertheless, it is absolutely crucial to understand Derrida's critique not as a conclusion against the gift as such. Its impossibility, rather than simply negating the gift, constitutes not only the very condition of sustaining all economies of exchange; it is also the condition of hope, a hope for the pure gift that is *not yet* ("On the Gift" 60). To fill the other half of the Pauline formulation, Jean-Luc Marion, whose work in one sense holds Gadamer and Derrida in tension, offers a phenomenology of gifts that are always *already here*.²⁴ If there is a gift, it would be for Gadamer only because it was brought out through language. For Derrida, if the gift is here, it could not be distinguished from poison, madness, or fetish.

In attending to the *dissoi logoi* of dynamic gifts, charismology also takes up the serious challenge of Derrida's deconstruction of gifts. It sees hermeneutics and its impossibility as two sides of the same coin (*dissoi logoi*). Despite the so-called non-encounter between Gadamer and Derrida, many have recognized the importance of thinking about their profound differences, which nevertheless overlap on questions of

²⁴ For a slightly different reading that highlights Marion's Catholic and Derrida's Jewish notions of the gift, see Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*. While Marion more explicitly offers a phenomenology of the gift, I rely more on Gadamer because of his emphasis on language, rhetoric, and hermeneutics, which Marion intentionally avoids in favor of more visual tropes such as the icon. See *Being Given*.

language and interpretation.²⁵ Particularly useful for my purposes is Richard Bernstein's metaphor of a Gadamerian-Derridean constellation: "one in which their emphatic differences enable us to appreciate their strengths as well as their weaknesses" (267). By relating the two, Bernstein does not downplay important differences. If, on the one hand, the "figures that dominate Gadamer's writing are the metaphors of 'fusion,' 'play,' the 'to-and fro' movement of conversation," on the other hand, "'Rupture,' 'break,' 'heterogeneity,' 'impossibilities' are terms that saturate his [Derrida's] writing" (276-277). Nevertheless, as a pragmatist, Bernstein insists on making the Jamesian move to mediate the two:

But although these differences in language (and temperament) are manifest, we must be careful not to slip into a simplified binary opposition. Hermeneutical understanding would not make sense unless we also had a profound experience of what is alien, different, and other. And even though Derrida stresses the pervasiveness of *differance*, the very force of his deconstructions depends on appreciating the power of the desire for coherence, unity, and harmony. (278)

Furthermore, they both "reject a conception of praxis and ethical decision that would subsume it under the rubric of technological or instrumental thinking" (280). This rejection in my view opens the possibility of drawing from both—one critical, the other constructive—as resources to develop an ethical theory of a gift-language not unlike Gadamer's notion of *phronesis* and Derrida's "undecidability." These are among the extra-rational sources of power I mentioned earlier. I agree with Bernstein that "we can read Gadamer and Derrida (hermeneutics and deconstruction) as requiring each other.

²⁵ See the collected responses to the Gadamer-Derrida debate in Michelfelder and Palmer, *Dialogue and Deconstruction*.

In the fusion of horizons, there is a tendency to gloss over the heterogeneities and abysses that confront us. But there is also a danger of becoming so fascinated with impossibilities and undecidables that we lose any sense of coherence and unity in our lives” (281). Bernstein’s mediation is characteristically pragmatist, and I cite him intentionally to call attention to my own stance as a pragmatist. It is on the grounds of American pragmatism that I draw from Gadamer and Derrida for my particular approach to charismology. Perhaps this is a good time to take stock of the various theories and methodologies informing this study—my own constellation, if you will—before showing how they can help move us toward a charismological reading of dynamic gifts in American culture.

It was Gadamer who helped us understand more fully how “prejudices” are operative in productive ways toward understanding. I make mine explicit here to describe my own position within a broader horizon. This study of dynamic gifts comes out of my formal training in both theology and literature. In addition to an emphasis on biblical studies (e.g. exegesis, hermeneutics), my seminary training focused on the study of theology and culture rooted in the neo-Calvinist tradition of Abraham Kuyper, one of whose central contributions was a theology of common grace.²⁶ This particular theology asserts there are non-salvific forms of grace, which enable among other things the cultivation of every aspect of culture by believers and unbelievers alike (e.g. art, science, politics, religion). In this view, culture is constituted not simply by the gifts of

²⁶ For an introduction to the basic work and life of Abraham Kuyper, see Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*. For Kuyper’s work in English, see his 1898 Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, *Lectures on Calvinism*, as well as the collection of essays in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, edited by Bratt, who also wrote Kuyper’s biography.

human talent and effort, but by an underlying gift of common grace. While sharing Karl Barth's rejection of the Enlightenment, Kuyper nevertheless serves as a counterpoint to Barth's *Nein!* to natural theology.²⁷ If saving grace cuts between believers and non-believers, common grace cuts *through* them. My own Kuyperian training, along with the deep influence of Paul Tillich's pneumatological theology of culture and Gustavo Gutierrez's liberation theology, made me just as suspicious of Barth's "dialectical theology" (absolute difference) as Hegel's dialectical teleology (complete identity). This particular approach to theology of culture prepared the way to pursue my doctoral studies in literature and theory—originally with the intent to extend my M.A. thesis on Ralph Ellison.

This combination of Kuyper (Reformed theology), Tillich (existential philosophy and theology), and Ellison (American Pragmatism and literature) led to an examination of two underlying theoretical frameworks, namely, rhetorical pragmatism and hermeneutic phenomenology. Both in my view share not only a critical concern about the gift, but also something like a mutual genealogy. Whether we trace Emerson's influence on Nietzsche or William James's influence on Husserl, or the entirety of German Idealism on both American Transcendentalism and Pragmatism, the choice of these two schools of thought was not arbitrary. While figures in the phenomenological tradition pose the question of spirit and its gifts more explicitly (e.g. Taylor, Derrida, Marion), I share more of the cultural and therefore political assumptions found in a

²⁷ According to some religious scholars, Barthians have now become the dominant influence in most seminaries and divinity schools in the US. See Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* for an assessment of "the new traditionalism" (Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas) and its related Anglican counterpart "radical orthodoxy" (John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward).

particular strain of what I will call *religious pragmatism* that includes figures such as Cornel West, Jeffrey Stout, Giles Gunn, and Steven Mailloux.²⁸ My aim is to demonstrate that such a combination of American literature, religious pragmatism, and rhetorical hermeneutics can contribute to a critical and yet constructive theory of gifts. In this particular case, my own Kuyperian perspective inevitably serves as one backdrop to this study, but charismology, broadly as the study of gifts, does not have to reflect a particular theological commitment. Even so, it cannot avoid the historical question of the gift as modern translations of grace (Taylor), the hermeneutic attempt to mediate its reception (Gadamer), the deconstructive ironies of its impossibility (Derrida), and yet its ethical and political potential for democratic revaluations of tradition (Stout).

The last point about the gift's relevance to democracies brings us at last to the question of American literature. My contention is that a charismological reading of nineteenth-century writers is not a forced theoretical application. Indeed, the gift I argue is fundamentally a part of American culture. While I will examine further in chapter 4 Stout's notion of gratitude as an appropriate democratic response to the gifts of tradition, he suggests that the emergence of modern democratic culture, along with its rhetoric of rights, correlates in one sense with an increasing disdain for begging, that is, the deferential dependence on and submission to gifts (*Democracy and Tradition* 201-209). This correlation calls attention to the structural asymmetry of gift-exchange—something the French Revolutionaries understood when for a time they successfully made it illegal for parents to give gifts to their children (Hyland, *Gifts*). While nothing like this occurs in the American context, since the earliest texts depicting Columbus's gift-

²⁸ In chapter 4, I will focus on religious pragmatism and its relevance to both the topic of the gift and the interdisciplinary field of religion and literature.

exchange with Native Americans or John Smith's description of a kind of gratuitousness in New England not found in the Old, an important theme of American literature in general is an anxiety about gifts. Looking at just a couple early American antecedents will highlight this anxiety of gifts that Emersonian pragmatists will attempt to reinterpret and democratize.

One of the earliest and most important antecedents of nineteenth-century charismologies can be found in the Puritan imaginary, in which the asymmetries of gift-exchange are rooted in an interpretation of the New World itself as a gift of divine promise.²⁹ In his 1630 sermon still aboard the *Arbella*, John Winthrop lays out a model of Christian charity that ought to guide the new colony keenly aware of the inequalities that reflect a providential order: "A Model hereof: God Almighty in His most holy and wise providence, hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection" (Mulford 238). The reasons Winthrop gives to explain this hierarchical distribution of wealth and dignity all center on a theory of gifts: first, differences display "the glory of His power, in ordering all these for the preservation and good of the whole" because God is "more honored in dispensing His gifts to man by man"; secondly, it occasions the "work of His Spirit" both to restrain the wickedness of either exploiting the

²⁹ The gift's central role in Puritan theology can be traced back to the importance it played in Calvin's theology. For Calvin's concept of the gift, see Billings's *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*. For an example of a description of the New World as gift, see John Cotton's farewell sermon, "God's Promise to His Plantation" (1630), delivered to Winthrop and the Massachusetts Bay Colony just before they departed for the New World: "Canst thou say that God spied out this place for thee, and there hath settled thee above all hindrances? didst thou finde that God made roome for thee either by lawfull descent, or purchase, or gift, or other warrantable right? Why then this is the place God hath appointed thee; here hee hath made roome for thee."

poor or the despised revolting against their superiors, and to bestow “His graces” in and through the regenerate; lastly, it draws people to be “knit more nearly together in the bonds of brotherly affection,” that is, ready to be generous if someone is in a position of need because “God still reserves the property of these gifts to Himself.”

What these three reasons basically suggest is that gifts constitute both the conditions of inequality and the sources by which needs ought to be met. In other words, the structural asymmetry of the gift is both reflective and productive. It not only reflects a prior imbalance, but also produces the means by which wealth is redistributed. The assumption is that the gifts of God must never concentrate permanently in one’s hands. Hence the goal of this model is not to do away with imbalance and difference entirely, but to keep gifts continually moving, to keep them in circulation. The recognition of divine gifts ought to motivate human giving. Winthrop’s apt phrase, “dispensing His gifts to man by man,” which I use as the title of this chapter, depicts all the ironies of a gift that must be repeated, partly because it never gives enough. Or it gives such that rather than abolishing differences, it sustains them. To use Gadamer’s formulation, there is an essential inexactness to the finite gift that requires its infinite giving. While this is still a long way from a democratic theory of gifts, what is remarkable is Winthrop’s use of the phrase to explain why the gifts of God are not dispensed directly “by His own immediate hands.” God is more honored in this way, is how Winthrop puts it. But it also signifies an anxiety about the receding hand, and therefore, the responsibility of Providence. God has done his part of the covenant by giving the New World. Should the model of charity fail, however, the fault will lie with our failure to meet the gift’s obligation, which is first to see our possessions as gifts, and secondly, for us to be their

dispensers. Thus, what remains after the hand of Providence recedes is a mutual indebtedness, which Winthrop describes as the bond of love. The gift that remains is also a debt that motivates further giving.

Some two centuries after Winthrop's sermon, Washington Irving's secularized account of the gift in *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1819) continues to wrestle with this same problem of a debt that remains after the gift. In other words, secularization does not necessarily change much. Rather than resolve the problem of debt, Irving examines yet another source of anxiety, this time stemming from America's cultural debt to Europe in general and in particular to England. America may have all the "charms of nature" (12), insists Crayon, "But in the depth of winter, when nature lies despoiled of every charm and wrapped in her shroud of sheeted snow, we turn for our gratifications to moral sources" (163). The depth of winter, Irving's traveling narrator describes in this passage, is the Christmas season when we turn to our moral sources. These sources are not necessarily religious, but traditional and especially aesthetic in that the gratifying gifts Geoffrey Crayon seeks are the artistic masterpieces and cultural treasures of Europe. In "The Author's Account of Himself," Crayon describes his intent "to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement—to tread, as it were, in the footsteps of antiquity—to loiter about the ruined castle—to meditate on the falling tower—to escape, in short, from the commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past" (12). That Irving writes this opening chapter ironically is clear when Crayon says he wants to see "the gigantic race from which [he is] degenerated," suggesting both corruption and departure from the European sources beyond the American self. Indeed, I want to suggest that Irving's

irony cuts much deeper. Treading in the “footsteps of antiquity” is not only to return to the historical castles and towers of a European past, but also to shadow or follow England’s surpassing of America. The American “present” as both tense and gift is rendered commonplace by the “shadowy grandeurs” of a past that is both prior and yet more advanced. Overshadowed by the gifts of Europe, Crayon is left to struggle with the subsequent problem of resentment:

I had, beside all this, an earnest desire to see the great men of the earth. We have, it is true, our great men in America: not a city but has an ample share of them. I have mingled among them in my time, and been almost withered by the shade into which they cast me; for there is nothing so baleful to a small man as the shade of a great one, particularly the great man of a city. But I was anxious to see the great men of Europe; for I had read the works of various philosophers, that all animals degenerated in America, and man among the number. A great man of Europe, thought I, must therefore be as superior to a great man of America, as a peak of the Alps to a highland of the Hudson.

In this passage, Irving not only establishes the problem of resentment, but also provides an ironical opening to overcoming it. If we are suspicious of Crayon’s number of great men in every city, then we might also question the distance between Europe’s greatness and America’s degeneration. A charismological reading examines how Irving attempts to overcome resentment by identifying an American gift that can match the “shadowy grandeurs” of England, to which America has thus far been indebted. Focusing on the Christmas chapters, which deal with the gift most explicitly, will uncover just how “shadowy” America’s debts to England really are.

When Crayon arrives with his friend Bracebridge at the latter's home to celebrate a genuine old English Christmas, Bracebridge says, "It was the policy of the good old gentleman to make his children feel that home was the happiest place in the world; and I value this delicious home feeling as one of the choicest gifts a parent could bestow" (175). Indeed, this home feeling Bracebridge describes as a gift is Crayon's own earlier definition of what Christmas is about. The gift of Christmas is not only its "announcement of the religion of peace and love," but also "the season for gathering together of family connections, and drawing closer again those bands of kindred hearts, which the cares and pleasures and sorrows of the world are continually operating to cast loose" (163). Using charismological language related to the gift, Crayon elaborates further to say that Christmas "is indeed the season of regenerated feeling—the season for kindling, not merely the fire of hospitality in the hall, but the genial flame of charity in the heart" (166). It brings "the peasant and the peer together, and [blends] all the ranks in one warm generous flow of joy and kindness" (164). All this regenerated feeling of charity and generous flow also takes material form in "the presents of good cheer passing and repassing, those tokens of regard, and quickeners of kind feelings" (165). But when Crayon arrives to witness and celebrate these gifts of regenerated feeling, Irving problematizes them by showing just how artificial these traditional gifts are. Over the course of the five chapters comprising the Christmas tales, we are made to question the authenticity of everything from the layered architecture of the home to the interior décor with the knight's armor, from the tightly regulated old games and activities to the immediate effects of the Christmas sermon. After all the fuss about preserving the purity of Christmas, even the peacock pie turns out in the end to be made of pheasants.

Irving's larger point is that history in general is always artificial since it is the present that reconstructs the past by the necessary means of the artifices and art of architecture, custom, and rhetoric. Therefore, if the present must actively reconstruct the past, then this undermines to what extent America is indebted to the European gifts of "shadowy grandeurs," which ultimately turn out in one sense to be just shadows.

However, it is important to note that Irving is making a more profound charismological point that gifts, no matter how artificial our reconstructions of the past, are not completely illusory. Shadows they may be, but they nevertheless point to the existence of something real. In fact, the artifices of Christmas, rather than emptying the gift of regenerated feeling, make it possible. Thus, Irving overcomes the problem of American resentment toward its European past by in a sense democratizing the temporality of the gift. It is not only the past that gives. We too have our gifts to give—the present that presents its presents—to a past that only exists by means of our own donations. In Gadamerian terms, we can have access to the gifts of the past (e.g. regenerated feeling of Christmas) only by bearing gifts of our own (e.g. art). In particular, it is for Irving "the gift of poetry to hallow every place in which it moves" (86).³⁰ In hallowing the gifts of Christmas with the gift of poetry, it is "as the ivy winds its rich foliage about the gothic arch and mouldering tower, *gratefully repaying their*

³⁰ As a borderline figure between American Neoclassicism and Romanticism, there is a tension in Irving's notion of the gift of poetry. On the one hand, following the neoclassical tradition rooted in Sidney, the gift of poetry adds something not already found in nature. While reflecting on Shakespeare, Crayon writes, "I could not but reflect on the singular gift of the poet; to be able thus to spread the magic of his mind over the very face of nature; to give to things and places a charm and character not their own, and to turn this 'working-day world' into a perfect fairy land. He is indeed the true enchanter, whose spell operates, not upon the senses, but upon the imagination and the heart" (237-238). On the other hand, particularly in the Christmas tales, rather than adding to nature, the gift brings out something that is otherwise inaccessible in nature.

support, by clasping together their tottering remains, and, as it were, embalming them in verdure” (162, italics mine). Gratitude in the form of poetic gifts does not result in deference to and resentment of the past. Instead, it clasps together the “tottering remains” of a past whose gifts just might “by any lucky chance, in these days of evil, rub out one wrinkle from the brow of care, or beguile the heavy heart of one moment of sorrow; if [they] can now and then penetrate through the gathering film of misanthropy, prompt a benevolent view of human nature, and make my reader more in good humor with his fellow beings and himself, surely, surely,” Crayon abruptly interrupts the Christmas narrative and concludes, “I shall not then have written entirely in vain” (206). This notion of poetry as a kind of gift that can penetrate misanthropy and prompt benevolence can be seen as one of the substitutes to grace that Taylor writes about, one of the means to charity.

While a Gadamerian reading points to this careful mediation between the gifts of moral sources and the gifts of poetic gratitude, a Derridean reading questions not how the gift might appear but whether it ever does. Irving hopes that the gift might penetrate even for just “one moment,” but for Crayon, it seems that the gift is more often deferred rather than delivered. Unlike Crayon’s ideal description of the blending of peasants and peers in a “warm generous flow” (164), there remain “awkward demonstrations of deference and regard” when the squire interacts with the younger peasants (193). Crayon “hopes of witnessing the happy meeting” between some boys and their pony Bantam, but he is disappointed when “a grove of trees shut it from my sight” (171). His sudden appearance silences and then frightens away both a group of children carolers “lovely as seraphs” (183) and a maid who ends her jig suddenly and runs off “with an air

of roguish affected confusion” (194). In all these deferred moments, Crayon *hears* the sound of joy and pleasure of Christmas gifts, but is never quite *witness* to them. From this perspective, it is appropriate that the Christmas episode ends so abruptly with the *hope* of what the gift *might* do. Crayon’s narrative of and search for the gift must be interrupted suddenly because there is no end or satisfaction. In this sense, Irving does not resolve the problem of resentment at all. He only defers it, not by democratizing the gift in a dynamic flow, but by merely reversing it. In this reading, Europe is then indebted to American expressions of gratitude, just as the gifts of a tottering past remain only because the present wraps itself around them.

In “L’Envoy,” the postscript to the second English volume of *The Sketch Book*, Irving responds to critics of the first volume, whose “abundance of valuable advice is given gratis”:

He [the author] only can say, in his vindication, that he faithfully determined, for a time, to govern himself in his second volume by the opinions passed upon his first; but he was soon brought to a stand by the contrariety of excellent counsel [...] Thus perplexed by the advice of his friends, who each in turn closed some particular path, but left him all the world beside to range in, he found that to follow all their counsels would, in fact, be to stand still. He remained for a time sadly embarrassed; when, all at once, the thought struck him to ramble on as he had begun; that his work being miscellaneous, and written for different humors, it could not be expected that any one would be pleased with the whole; but that if it should contain something to suit each reader, his end would be completely answered. Few guests sit down to a varied table with an equal appetite for every

dish [...] With these considerations he ventures to serve up this second volume in the same heterogeneous way with his first; simply requesting the reader, if he should find here and there something to please him, to rest assured that it was written expressly for intelligent readers like himself; but entreating him, should he find any thing to dislike, to tolerate it, as one of those articles which the author has been obliged to write for readers of a less refined taste. (321-322)

Irving reminds his critics that their gifts given in gratis are contingent upon a gift prior to theirs—the gift of hospitality at the varied table of the *Sketch Book's* contents. This may be the occasion when Hegel's slave recognizes himself in fact as the giver of the master's gifts, but he has not yet suspended (or transcended) the dialectic or horizon of exchange. Turning the tables, so to speak, only changes who sits at the head.

If Winthrop represents a Puritan theology of gifts and Irving represents a secular account of their cultural significance, both share the same theoretical understanding that gifts circulate in an economy of exchange resulting in obligation and indebtedness. There may be ways to displace or defer the debt elsewhere, but it cannot be entirely avoided. Someone always has to pay. This similarity is significant because it suggests that secularization alone does not automatically resolve the asymmetries of gift-exchange, which as Mauss has argued prefigures modern forms of market economies. But to conclude from this that all gifts operate only within economies of exchange would be premature because it would have to ignore or misread other ways of thinking the gift. If Irving does not quite resolve the problem of resentment by escaping from an economy of the gift, some of his literary successors nevertheless attempt other means to resist

the encroachment of an increasing rationalization of the market from consuming more and more of life.

In the chapters that follow, I want to propose an alternative, more mystical or pneumatological way of understanding the gift by examining especially the writings of Emerson and James. What they share is an important difference from Irving's depiction of gift-exchange. While Irving inherits the Puritan notion of a debt that remains after the gift, Emerson and James return to another theological emphasis on a grace that either satisfies or suspends or transcends our indebtedness. In the poem cited as the epigraph to this chapter, Edward Taylor writes, "But mighty, Gracious Lord / Communicate / Thy Grace to breake the Cord." The cord is the web of sin spun out of the resources within "Hells spider" in order "To tangle Adams race / In's stratigems." The communication of grace breaks the cord to establish a communion with "Glorys gate / And State." By the nineteenth century, anxiety about the spider's web had less to do with "Hells spider" and more to do with the webs spun out of our own industrial and economic resources. Henry David Thoreau's criticism of furniture, for example, comes to mind: "I cannot but feel compassion when I hear some trig, compact-looking man, seemingly free, all girded and ready, speak of his 'furniture,' as whether it is insured or not. 'But what shall I do with my furniture?' My gay butterfly is entangled in a spider's web then" (*Walden* 48-49). Thoreau complains in a later passage, "There is nowhere recorded a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life" (57). This appeal to life as a gift comes at the end of the opening chapter "Economy," which examines the many ways our lives are defined by the dialectic of debt and success. We are both spider and butterfly still caught in our own webs or cocoons, so to speak: "The life which

men praise and regard as successful is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?" (16). From a charismological perspective, *Walden* is an attempt to uncover this gift of life and the gratitude owed to sources other than the market. Following Emerson's examples of true gifts to be flowers, fruits, and a portion of ourselves, Thoreau says he wants not philanthropy, which is but the stem and leaves that remain in the web of economy. Instead, he wants "the flower and fruit of a man; that some fragrance be wafted over from him to me, and some ripeness flavor our intercourse. His goodness must not be a partial and transitory act, but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious. This is a charity that hides a multitude of sin" (56). What some figures in the nineteenth century, like Thoreau, seek is a gift of life, a non-economic superfluity and charity, to break the cords that bind us to a web of debt and resentment. Such dynamic gifts are various substitutes for divine grace, the means by which human agency is reconnected to sources of spirit or power beyond the self that point to ideals, they insist, higher than instrumental or economic ones.

To develop this charismological approach, I offer in the next chapter a close reading of Emerson's rhetoric of gifts as the experience or reception of dynamic sources of power. This reliance on a reception of gifts may seem to contradict the aims of this great champion of self-reliance. But as I argue, Emerson shows how dynamic gifts operate in a non-economic mode that can instead resolve the problem of debt and resentment. In order to develop this non-economic theory, Emerson shifts the interpretive framework of gifts away from a hermeneutics of exchange and toward what I call a *hermeneutics of empowerment* rooted in the pneumatological concepts of

emanation, incarnation, and flow that mediate without collapsing infinite power and finite form. I focus on a much-neglected essay called “Gifts” from the *Second Series* (1844) and demonstrate how his language of the flow of gifts can inform our reading of his more well-known writings from *Nature* (1836) to “Experience” (1844). Emerson’s rhetoric of gifts attempts to open up sources of dynamic power from what he calls “the infinite prospective of being” that gives us more fully to ourselves rather than contradict our self-reliance. What Emerson calls experience and which I describe as the reception of dynamic gifts opens up finite form to sources of infinite power. Human beings with their rhetorical capacity as language-makers are, as he calls them, “a golden impossibility” charged to mediate the excesses of power and form without collapsing them together.

By extending the connection between the rhetorical and the religious in Emerson’s language of gifts, chapter 3 focuses on the importance of the gift in William James’s development of a religious pragmatism, which stems from his philosophical turn in the 1880s and culminates in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and *Pragmatism* (1907). Part of what James inherits from Emerson is the notion that modes of language can either close or disclose sources of dynamic power that come to us like gifts without obligation or debt. Language mediates the reception of dynamic gifts. But James goes one step further to add that our hermeneutic frameworks condition not only the phenomenological appearance of dynamic gifts, but also the direction of their pragmatic effects. In James’s particular formulation, not only are beliefs necessary preconditions to experience the power of dynamic gifts, but they also go a long way in determining how those interpretive frameworks direct our actions. In other words, beliefs

in, say, Buddhism or Marxism, can potentially open us up to similar sources of dynamic gifts, but in the long run, they are not the same or, better yet, may not lead us to the same place. Making such fine distinctions is significant especially in light of recent criticisms of James's work on pragmatism and religion, most notably by Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor, who claim that James is either too religious or not enough. I argue instead that James's hermeneutics of religious experience shifts a metaphysics of God into the pragmatic effects of dynamic gifts, which are nevertheless conditioned by our beliefs or interpretive frameworks. The existence of God cannot be determined for the pragmatist, but belief in the divine (or anything else) may just make a difference if it empowers us toward melioristic possibilities that otherwise might not be realized.

Whereas the first three chapters focus on contributing to recent theories of the gift, the final chapter turns to the second aim of the dissertation, which is to situate my thesis in recent debates about the field of American literature and religion. To highlight my contribution, I begin by assessing the history and current state of this interdisciplinary field, which, according to some critics, is divided between secularists like Richard Rorty who advocate the replacement of religion with literature and traditionalists like Stanley Hauerwas who call for an aggressive return to religion. In an attempt to move beyond this impasse between what Stout calls liberal secularism and religious traditionalism, I draw on the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois and other more recent pragmatists to chart an alternative approach to the study of religion in American literature. These religious pragmatists, as I call them, help me to develop a democratized rhetoric of gratitude that enables critics to acknowledge the complex spiritual and secular sources of American culture without exaggerating narratives about

the eclipse of religion and the necessity of an aggressive return. Instead of resulting in what Roger Lundin calls “the ironic limits of [secular] experience” or what Heidegger calls “the horrible depletion of the [religious] gift in light of the logic of capitalism,” this pragmatist rhetoric of gratitude opens up the possibility of a revisionist history of American pragmatism, literature, and religion as dynamic sources of agency that can still empower us to reach for ideals higher than purely material or economic ones.

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, this dissertation is a preliminary step toward what I am calling a charismological reading of various manifestations of spirit and its gifts throughout American literature, philosophy, and religion. It is, as Emerson says, initial and not final, a point of departure and not an arrival. Thus, the primary objective is to develop out of a close rhetorical reading of American pragmatism a hermeneutic framework that can later be applied to a broad range of authors and texts that depict reactions against the dominance of rational control in favor of spiritual or extra-rational sources of agency and empowerment. I hope in future projects to demonstrate more fully how charismology can contribute to specific readings of American texts. But as Heidegger saw with the question of being, the question of the gift remains all too often at the level of objective (or ontic) analysis, while I am trying to uncover a more fundamental hermeneutic of the gift as infinite sources of dynamic power that are nevertheless mediated by finite forms of language. Put another way, this study is an attempt to extend Gadamer’s analysis of truth as mediated by art and history to an analysis of agency through literary and religious language. To this task I now turn.

CHAPTER 2

“A Golden Impossibility”

The Rhetoric of Dynamic Gifts in Ralph Waldo Emerson

How much, Preventing God! how much I owe
To the defences thou hast round me set:
Example, custom, fear, occasion slow, —
These scorned bondmen were my parapet.
I dare not peep over this parapet
To gauge with glance the roaring gulf below,
The depths of sin to which I had descended,
Had not these me against myself defended.³¹

Between 1831 and 1833, around the time he resigned from his pastorate in the Unitarian Church, Emerson wrote the poem above titled “Grace.” It is one of his most explicit meditations on this theological doctrine that underlies his rhetoric and theory of gifts. Beginning this chapter with a brief reading of this poem reveals what is at stake in this concept for Emerson and how it can appear throughout his other essays. The champion of American individualism writes on what seems initially to be a very un-Emersonian theme. Grace here given by one Preventing God is the negative defense that keeps the poet from even daring to look at the roaring gulf of sin below. It can be difficult to imagine this to be the same person who once replied to a question about his self-reliance, “if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil.”³² How could the man who opened years later the coffins of his deceased wife and son to see the

³¹ Emerson, “Grace.” Not published until 1842 in *The Dial*. See Porte, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, p. 482 n.1.

³² “Self-Reliance,” *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, p. 30. Unless indicated otherwise, all subsequent citations of Emerson’s writings come from this edition.

unlikely of a bodily resurrection be afraid to glance over the parapets of a preventing grace?³³ Against the well-known Emersonian virtues of genius and non-conformity, the defenses of example and custom sound more like those of Edmund Burke or Matthew Arnold, two classic English defenders of tradition, rather than two of his most well-known anti-traditionalist disciples, Thoreau and Nietzsche. Examining the complexity of Emerson's thinking through religious concepts like grace can potentially open up another way to assess the reach of his influence among his many "anti-disciples" on both the left and the right.³⁴

Against a more traditionalist interpretation, the poem can be read ironically. The defenses of grace are also "These scorned bondmen" and the repetition of "how much" in the first line demands a measuring of his debt even as it says he dares not gauge the depths of sin. Hardly in these lines is there any trace of pious gratitude. To ask "how much," after all, is quite different from the messianic question "how long." *How much, Preventing God, how much?* doesn't quite sound right. Did Whitman not read Emerson correctly when he celebrated the "Me myself" in direct contrast to the Augustinian confession of "me against myself" found in the last line? The conditional sentence in the last couplet, which grammatically should read, "The depths of sin to which I [would have] descended, / Had not these me against myself defended," breaks down to suggest rather than a conditional possibility, a definite point in the past when the

³³ Richardson's biography *Mind on Fire* begins in the prologue with Emerson's grieving his first wife Ellen's death, perhaps to offset the perception that he was incapable of thinking tragically.

³⁴ Joel Porte uses the term "anti-disciples" in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, xi. Lawrence Buell slightly revises it in his chapter "Emerson as Anti-Mentor" from *Emerson*. Arnold's and Nietzsche's reception of Emerson has been well documented including by Buell. For an interesting argument about Emerson's reception of Burke, see Stout, chapter 1 "Character and Piety" from *Democracy and Tradition*, 34-41.

descent had indeed already taken place: If these parapets had not defended me against myself... well, even then I had already descended to the depths of sin. To say Emerson sacrificed sense to preserve meter and form might just as well be to say that stubbornly defending example or custom can result in contradiction. Read ironically, then, the poem is about the paradox of grace, about the ways in which grace is scorned precisely because rather than defending me against my sinful self, the existence of both sin and grace are contingent upon each other. The grammatical breakdown of the last two lines suggests grace prevents sin only once one has already descended to a roaring gulf of sin. Grace fails to prevent sin in the first place because it always comes too late, and because it relies on a power not one's own.³⁵ Instead of empowering moral responsibility, the passive reliance on grace engenders sin by abolishing individual responsibility. So goes the Unitarian critique of Calvinism. As Emerson prepares to resign from the ministry, does this signal one last look at a theology he is about to leave behind?³⁶

The answer to this question is more complicated than it may seem at first. For the most part, Emerson does abandon the broad spectrum of traditional doctrines of grace, about which there were fierce debates in the aftermath of the awakenings and revivals. With few exceptions, the word almost never appears theologically in his essays

³⁵ Luther emphasized this point perhaps more than anyone else. Drawing on the Pauline tradition, grace can only come after the law reveals our sin. There can be no grace without sin.

³⁶ In *The Regenerate Lyric*, Elisa New makes an argument that "the poem's uneasy tone" marks Emerson's subsequent departure from convention: "the poem is prolegomenon to the spiritual autobiography of 'Nature,' and to the celebration of will in 'Self-Reliance'" (p. 52). This point is part of New's larger argument that the kind of unbounded poetic perspective, as Emerson espoused, results also in his failure as a poet. My reading of Emerson's language of gifts is an attempt to nuance suggestions that he ever fully departed from religious concepts like grace.

(and rarely even in his sermons), but is used in a more secular sense to describe one's comportment or style. The following passage from "History" is more characteristic of how Emerson uses the word grace: "We honor the rich because they have externally the freedom, power, and grace which we feel to be proper to man, proper to us" ("History" 2:5). In many of his sermons also, grace rarely shows up in full theological dress: "Even the endowments of man—the upright form, the skillful hand, the speaking tongue, the Memory, the world of arts, all these only raise man to the head of the animal Creation and are useful to secure to him his bread and clothes with more convenience and grace, and lay him at last in the ground with a somewhat more decency than other lower creatures" (CXVI 1831; *Complete Sermons* 3:163). The endowments or gifts are more ornament than supernatural aid.

When Emerson does use the word more theologically, he often refers to distinctions between Unitarian and Calvinist definitions. As a Unitarian and later Transcendentalist, Emerson rejected a certain Puritan understanding of divine grace that seemed to attenuate individual moral responsibility by relying on an unmerited gift: "something like it is supposed in the popular theology that there are elect persons and reprobate persons who enjoy grace and suffer punishment without regard to merit [...] But nothing can be more gross than such an imagination of God" (CXLI 1832; *Complete Sermons* 4:55). What Emerson rejects here is the Calvinist theology of grace as election. However, while he rejects what Calvinists called *irresistible grace*, the belief that the gift of divine unmerited grace cannot be rejected, Emerson in one of his few sermons that addresses grace directly acknowledges human dependence on other definitions of divine grace: "It is in this faith," in the humility that sees God in all things,

“that the grace finds its true source and home. What can I offer God but my humility, when most clearly I explore my relation to him. I have nothing, I am nothing that is not his gift” (LXXXII 1830; *Complete Sermons* 2:223). This notion might be called *universal grace*, which sees all of life and nature as divine gifts. Whereas irresistible grace predetermines one’s eternal fate regardless of individual merit, universal grace is what constitutes and sustains one’s existence as well as the conditions that make individual merit possible (e.g. nature, life). If the former is emphasized within Calvinism, the latter finds its strongest adherents in the natural theology of Unitarianism (Ahlstrom 401).

Notwithstanding these few exceptions, the general absence of theological grace from his vocabulary suggests Emerson may have had a more fundamental problem with the various ways grace was being used and debated in his day. Despite the claim that it is a free gift, grace leaves its recipient with at least some measure of obligation to worship, debt to repay, and at times even resentment at the expectation of deference. Not only were Presbyterians embroiled in polemics about the nature and function of divine grace that led to their split in 1838, but the so-called Second Unitarian Controversy sparked in part by Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” (1838) was about whether the gifts of divine revelation should be received, as Emerson put it, first- or second-hand. If grace is something given by God to humans who must then respond appropriately in return—a general enough statement that could encompass Calvinists and Unitarians—then Emerson felt the gift is no longer free. That is, as long as grace operates in what Derrida calls an economy of exchange, indebtedness is unavoidable and freedom compromised. Theologies of grace in the nineteenth century, especially in its Christological modes, often examine the gift within a horizon of exchange as an

object independent of its giver and receiver—e.g. Christ paid our debts to God.³⁷ So conceived, the gift remains the thing that engenders obligations of reciprocity between a subject and object. In his last sermon as a minister about what we owe because of Christ's sacrifice, Emerson objected to the Lord's Supper as an appropriate answer by asking, "Is not this to make vain the gift of God?" (Porte 25).

Against an economic model that continues to dominate theoretical discourses about the gift, I will argue not that Emerson completely abandons theologies of grace, but that he draws instead on a more mystical or pneumatological theology of the Spirit and its gifts in order to shift the hermeneutic framework from exchange to empowerment. In this alternative framework that contributes something new beyond Derrida and Milbank, Emerson attempts to purge from the reception of gifts the problems of debt and resentment, while still holding onto the notion of grace as the reception of *dynamic gifts* that empower individuals to do what they are otherwise unable to do: grace as power, agency, and inspiration, all of which are nevertheless mediated and conditioned by language. Close attention to the subtle theological language throughout Emerson's writings can reveal just how concerned he was about a non-economic rhetorical theory of grace in order to resist turning even such gifts as nature or life itself into a commodity.

Besides addressing recent theoretical debates about the gift, my argument also contributes to the discussion of the historical claims of Perry Miller's classic but controversial essay about the underlying pietistic continuities between Jonathan Edwards and Emerson. Seeing these figures within a broad pneumatological framework

³⁷ For a broad historical account of how various theologies of grace have changed, see Noll *America's God* and Holifield's *Theology in America*.

is one way to answer Miller's "question of how much in the transcendental philosophy emerged out of the American background" ("From Edwards to Emerson" 187). If, as Richard Poirier and others have suggested, we see pragmatism as an extension of Emerson's linguistic skepticism, then positing some kind of shared continuity between pragmatists and Puritans, even the antinomian ones, may seem all the more controversial and surprising. But that is precisely what I want to imply. A charismological reading of Emerson's (and in the next chapter James's) rhetoric of gifts highlights affinities to a pneumatological strain of piety that runs from John Cotton and Anne Hutchinson in the seventeenth century to James Marsh and Horace Bushnell in the nineteenth.³⁸ They are all reacting against forms of rational theology and philosophy by turning to the language of spirit and gifts. Despite differences among Puritans and Transcendentalists or Pragmatists and Pentecostals, they share important rhetorical commonalities that warrant close reading if we think about them under a broad history of pneumatology in the United States. Such a project is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but reading Emerson's rhetoric of gifts is an important contribution toward that larger religious history, which as Miller and others have shown has deep cultural and literary implications. In the remainder of this chapter, then, I want to demonstrate how Emerson draws on pneumatological conceptions of spirit and grace to translate them into a rhetorical theory of dynamic gifts (i.e. charismology) that instead of resulting in debt can enhance the experience of empowerment and open up greater sources of agency.

³⁸ See Holifield's *Theology in America*, which shows how these pietistic and antinomian strains of Christianity were reactions against what Holifield calls a Baconian emphasis on evidential reason that was dominant in theology.

*All his are mine, all mine his.*³⁹

“Gifts” is an important yet neglected short essay at the center of *Essays: Second Series* (1844).⁴⁰ In it, Emerson meditates on the potentials and problems of gift-exchange. Published shortly after the end of the Panic of 1837, the essay begins by making a distinction between bestowing gifts and paying debts:

It is said that the world is in a state of bankruptcy, that the world owes the world more than the world can pay, and ought to go into chancery, and be sold. I do not think this general insolvency, which involves in some sort all the population, to be the reason of the difficulty experienced at Christmas and New Year, and other times, in bestowing gifts; since it is always so pleasant to be generous, though very vexatious to pay debts. (3:93)

The repetition of the world in the first two sentences suggests there is something absurd about the entire economic system of credit and debt. If the world owes itself more than what it can repay itself, then to whom must it be sold? The insolvency “involves in some

³⁹ From “Gifts” (1844).

⁴⁰ With the exception of Gary Shapiro, there has been almost no critical attention given to this essay, though it is sometimes anthologized or mentioned briefly in studies of the gift as in Schriff’s *The Logic of the Gift* or in the conclusion of Mauss’s classic study, *The Gift*. Even the most comprehensive readers of Emerson only quote a line or two when they mention it as in Packer’s “Forgiving the Giver: Emerson, Carlyle, Thoreau.” For Shapiro’s reading of the essay, see *Alcyone* and “‘Give Me a Break!’ Emerson on Fruit and Flowers,” pp. 98-113. While Shapiro argues that Emerson arrives at the same conclusion as Derrida on the impossibility of the gift, I rely on a close reading of the biblical allusions in “Gifts” within the context of Emerson’s other major essays to arrive at a very different conclusion.

sort all the population,” so it amounts to the world’s enslavement. To be sold away is to lose our self-possession. In Emersonian terms, it is the loss of self-reliance. Or more precisely, paying a debt already indicates it has been lost, for in repayment we lose what ultimately does not belong to us since it came by credit. Yet, Emerson says, even if we cannot repay our debts, there are times when our gifts are still due. The state of world or self-bankruptcy, then, must be independent of a state of generosity. This can be the case only if our gifts are the kinds of things that do not qualify as repayment. Therefore, the difficulty of giving, he says, is not a matter of having enough, but of choosing the proper gift.

Emerson offers two guidelines. The first is to give non-utilitarian gifts such as flowers “because they are a proud assertion that a ray of beauty outvalues all the utilities of the world” (which we must not forget is bankrupt). Fruits are also acceptable “because they are the flower of commodities, and admit of fantastic values being attached to them.” The second guideline is what Emerson calls the common gifts of necessity and character: “necessity makes pertinences and beauty every day, and one is glad when an imperative leaves him no option, since if the man at the door have no shoes, you have not to consider whether you could procure him a paint-box [...] Necessity does everything well” (94). The gift of one’s character is to give something “easily associated with him in thought. But our tokens of compliment and love are for the most part barbarous. Rings and other jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts. The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me [...] This is right and pleasing, for it restores society in so far to the primary basis, when a man’s biography is conveyed in his gift.” Giving the self as gift, then, is not simply contrary to repaying a debt. They

constitute different modes of exchange. Beauty, necessity, and character, Emerson suggests, are not the kinds of things that creditors will accept.

However, separating gifts and debts as two different modes of exchange does not entirely resolve the problem of indebtedness. From another perspective, which Emerson calls the “law of benefits,” these two modes often overlap, and when they do, the result is resentment: “The law of benefits is a difficult channel, which requires careful sailing, or rude boats. It is not the office of a man to receive gifts. How dare you give them? We wish to be self-sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten” (94). Anticipating Derrida's argument, Emerson outlines the pitfalls and contradictions of gifts that are bound up with obligation, ingratitude, interest, blackmail, and resentment. At the heart of these contradictions we circle back to one of Emerson's master tropes. To receive is no longer to be self-reliant: “Some violence, I think, is done, some degradation borne, when I rejoice or grieve at a gift. I am sorry when my independence is invaded, or when a gift comes from such as do not know my spirit, and so the act is not supported; and if the gift pleases me overmuch, then I should be ashamed that the donor should read my heart, and see that I love his commodity, and not him” (95). The material gift here is invasive. By possessing me I lose my self-possession, thereby contradicting one of Emerson's early dictums: “That is always best which gives me to myself” (“Divinity School Address” 1:82). And it is a problem he also addresses in “Self-Reliance,” when Emerson criticizes society's reliance on property, one of whose manifestation is the gift: “They measure their esteem of each other, by what each has, and not by what each is. But a cultivated man becomes ashamed of his property, out of new respect for his

nature. Especially he hates what he has, if he see that it is accidental, – came to him by inheritance, or gift, or crime” (2:49-50). The point seems clear: to be self-reliant, to be free from the contradictions of and resentment from gifts, receive them not. The gift, like the object obtained through crime, is property that does not belong to me.

But this conclusion cannot be the last word, since just a few pages earlier, Emerson writes, “Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life’s cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half possession” (2:47). Although this notion of a cultivated gift seems to be something immaterial unlike the “objective gift” in the previous paragraph, Emerson is concerned about the problem of debt underlying both phenomena of gifts. The word gift is significant in this passage because Emerson edited an earlier version written in his journal: “Insist on yourself. Never imitate. For your own *talent* you can present every moment with all the force of a lifetime’s cultivation but of the *adopted stolen talent* of anybody else you have only a frigid brief extempore half possession” (*Journals* 4:324, italics mine). The revision from *talent* to *gift* emphasizes the contrast between a gift, which is to be cultivated and given by the self, and a talent that is adopted and stolen from elsewhere. Regardless of these distinctions, however, what Emerson seems to mean ultimately is that whether the gift is a material object or not, if it is adopted by means of inheritance or imitation, it cannot but result in the loss of self-reliance. But apparently not so with a gift cultivated from within.

So what does all this mean? It is more blessed to give than to receive? This is the lesson Nietzsche seems to take away from reading Emerson.⁴¹ But then are we not back in the same horizon of exchange where credit and debt can be measured? On the one hand, the essay offers specific rules for distinguishing between repayment and gifts. On the other hand, it highlights precisely the ways in which gifts can result in obligation. What this contradiction suggests is that gift and debt are two sides of the same coin called exchange. This essay is important, however, not simply because Emerson identifies the double-sided irony of the gift reflected in its etymology as present or poison. Instead, it is significant because he offers a resolution to the contradictions of a free gift by taking to task not merely the kinds of objects that are exchanged, but the very horizon of exchange itself.

In contrast to describing a gift as something exchanged between two separate entities, the true gift operates along a horizon of what Emerson calls *flowing*:

The gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him. When the waters are at level, then my goods pass to him, and his to me. All his are mine, all mine his. I say to him, How can you give me this pot of oil, or this flagon of wine, when all your oil and wine is mine, which belief of mine this gift seems to deny? (3:95)

This passage, buried in the middle of a paragraph which itself is placed in the middle of the essay, is the key to Emerson's theory of gifts. It is Emerson's attempt *to mediate between giver and receiver without entirely collapsing the two*. The metaphor of flowing

⁴¹ See, for example, the last chapter of Part I, "The Gift-Giving Virtue," from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For Nietzsche's reception of this and other essays by Emerson, see Shapiro, *Alcyone*, pp. 24-29.

is an uninterrupted relation, a correspondence or responding together when “waters are at level.” Gift-flowing, so to speak, democratizes the otherwise hierarchical indebtedness that results from gift-exchange. The gift, for Emerson, is therefore not the object of oil or wine that once identified necessarily differentiates giver and receiver. The true gift is the gifted relation whereby all passes back and forth indistinguishably and effortlessly, so much so that the verbal predicate once established disappears to “all mine his.” Thus, the beautiful flower as gift, though etymologically unrelated, is the figure of flowing. The beauty of flowers always already flows because it gives itself without losing itself even as it draws its receiver into a non-utilitarian relation. Likewise, the gifts of character can be given and received without violating Emerson’s principle virtue of self-reliance. When “the poet brings his poem,” for example, not only does he give himself without losing himself, but he also gives to us without putting us in debt because in a gift-relation we receive from the poet what always already belongs to us.

This notion that gifts can be received without violating self-reliance is not new or unique to this essay. What Emerson calls flowing is implicit in many of his earlier essays. We can see this mediation between self-reliance and the reception of gifts especially when Emerson describes the gifts of genius. For example, the poet’s genius is that “He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth. The young man reveres men of genius, because, to speak truly, they are more himself than he is” (“The Poet” 3:4). The genius gives not out of his own wealth but of the wealth that is common to all. When the genius gives what already belongs to us, instead of violating our self-reliance, he gives us back to ourselves more fully. This is a contradiction only if one holds a static understanding of

self-reliance that emphasizes the individual over against the common. But this is not Emerson's definition: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, – that is genius" ("Self-Reliance" 2:27). Self-reliance for Emerson is a dynamic flow between the individual and the other, both of which share—though they are never entirely identical to—a common source of wealth or world.

Therefore, there is an important sense in which self-reliance is for Emerson always *ours* and not just *mine*. The poet and the genius are not self-contained individuals. At best they are representative men (and women) who share a common self. This theme shows up as early as 1837:

The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is One Man,—present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man. Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the *divided* or social state, these functions are parceled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, whilst each other performs his. The fable implies that the individual to possess himself, must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers. ("The American Scholar" 1:53)

The individual, to possess himself, must embrace all others. Likewise, there is no One Man without its embodiment in or through the priest, scholar, statesman, and so forth. This again exemplifies how Emerson attempts to mediate without collapsing giver and receiver. The dynamic flow of giving cannot take place if they are completely identical.

The self in self-reliance is both common source and individual embodiment mediated by gifts that cannot be reduced to mere commodities exchanged within an economic horizon. To reduce our gifts to commodities is for the self to be “metamorphosed into a thing, into many things”:

The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book; the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship.

The sinking imagery here is, so to speak, a perpendicular movement contrary to the horizontal flow of the gift-relation. The result of sinking is the loss of self-reliance and therefore to be “subject to dollars.” Metonymies and synecdoches like the machine and rope become literal, losing the allusive flow between antecedent and trope. In sinking we become things. And the duty of the American scholar is to wake us from our “sleep-walking” by provoking us to return to the “one soul which animates all men” (1:65, 66).⁴²

Not only do these earlier essays demonstrate that Emerson has long held a dynamic understanding of self-reliance, they also reveal how much this notion of flowing comes out of his thinking through religious categories. For example, I emphasize above the notion of *becoming* and *sinking* because it is both an allusion and contrast to a theology of incarnation. The Word becomes flesh, but it does not sink to become

⁴² For another perspective that ties together this notion of the common self as a resistance to reification, see West, *American Evasion*, pp. 13, 27, and 244 n.10.

subject to flesh. Even as it becomes flesh, it maintains its *word-iness*. The Word gives itself to the world without losing itself. I want to suggest that the incarnation is a useful and even appropriate figure for flowing. When he writes in “Gifts,” “All his are mine, all mine his,” we must hear the biblical allusion to the gift that flows between Father and Son: “All mine are thine, and thine are mine” (John 17:10). In his last sermon as a minister, Emerson goes beyond this seemingly Trinitarian formulation to write that Jesus as mediator “teaches us how to become like God” (Porte 23). Although Emerson is referring to William Ellery Channing’s famous sermon “Likeness to God” (1828), which provoked yet again the ire of Calvinists for narrowing the distance between the divine and human, in Emerson the simile would become by mid-century increasingly literal in a way that made even Unitarians nervous.⁴³ The same spirit that mediates between Father and Son also mediates between the divine and the rest of humanity.

Six years after his last sermon as minister, Emerson develops in the “Divinity School Address” precisely this point that the relationship between the divine and human is mediated by a gift of spirit or soul:

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that *God incarnates himself in man*, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, “I am divine. Through me,

⁴³ See Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, p. 402. For more on Emerson’s use of the Trinitarian formula as trope, see his essay “The Poet,” vol. 3, p. 5.

God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.” (1:81, italics mine)

This passage highlights Emerson’s thinking through the religious language of incarnation to develop a broader mediation between the divine and human without collapsing the two: “*One* man was true to what is in *you* and *me*.” The problem with the Trinitarian formula for Emerson is not the issue of Christ’s divinity as is the case for traditional Unitarianism. Its problem ultimately is that it denies the same flow between the divine and *all* humans: “The doctrine of the divine nature being forgotten, a sickness infects and dwarfs the constitution. Once man was all; now he is an appendage, a nuisance. And because the indwelling Supreme Spirit cannot wholly be got rid of, the doctrine of it suffers this perversion, that the divine nature is attributed to one or two persons, and denied to all the rest, and denied with fury” (80). To put it theologically, for Emerson, the phenomenon of incarnation, as often translated by Romantics, is more pneumatological than Christological. It reveals not simply one man’s divine nature, but the flow of spirit between divine and human, between Word and flesh, between infinite power and finite form. Therefore, it might even be said that the primary Christian event for Emerson is not so much the Incarnation as it is the Pentecost when the gift of the “Supreme Spirit” is given. Or more precisely, both the Incarnation and Pentecost are *the same event of the gift*. If Jesus teaches us how to become like God, as mentioned earlier, it is because “The spirit only can teach”:

Not any profane man, not any sensual, not any liar, not any slave can teach, but only he can give, who has; he only can create, who is. The man on whom the soul descends, through whom the soul speaks, alone can teach. Courage, piety,

love, wisdom, can teach; and every man can open his door to these angels, and they shall bring him the gift of tongues. (84)

The gift of tongues is the pneumatic gift given at Pentecost. It is a gift of power or empowerment that according to Emerson enables one like God to give, to create, and to teach, not in economic exchange, but in a dynamic flow. The term dynamic is especially relevant here since it comes from the same root word to describe the Spirit's power (*dunamis*). The gift at Pentecost is a dynamic gift, through which the Spirit's power to speak incarnates in individuals.⁴⁴ Therefore, dynamic gifts generate the kind of mediated gift-flow we saw earlier:

That is always best which gives me to myself [...] That which shows God *in me*, fortifies me. That which shows God *out of me*, makes me a wart and a wen.

There is no longer a necessary reason for my being. Already the long shadows of untimely oblivion creep over me, and I shall de cease forever. (82-83, italics mine)

The gifts of a God outside of me will creep over me, obligating me and thereby resulting in the loss of my being or self-reliance. But a God in me, which Emerson says is "the doctrine of inspiration" and "the doctrine of the soul" (80), gives in such a way that he gives me to myself. This kind of "coming again to themselves, or to God in themselves" Emerson calls "the gift of God" (83), and it results in a dynamic flow.

A dynamic gift does not contradict self-reliance or put its receiver in debt, which Emerson understands as the loss of self. Instead, it gives me back to the divine sources

⁴⁴ This "Pentecostal" Emerson, in a sense, emerges when we consider his affinity to Quakerism. When asked about his religion sometime around 1839, Emerson replied he was "more of a Quaker than anything else. I believe in the 'still small voice; and that voice is Christ within us" (quoted in Richardson, *Mind on Fire*, pp. 157-163). What attracted Emerson to the Quakers was among other things their doctrine of the inner light and continual revelation.

of the self. In relying on myself, I discover the divine from which the gift of power flows. Therefore, self-reliance, which shares with the word religion a common etymological source (*religare*), is not a departure from religion, but a non-economic gift-relation with the infinite sources of the self. Like religion, self-reliance is a binding of the self back together not in a static self-enclosure but in a dynamic flow.⁴⁵ Self-reliance is then a kind of self-reception. And at the end of “The Divinity School Address,” Emerson calls this dynamic flow between self-reliance and self-reception a “complete grace” (93). It is Emerson’s way of rethinking the gift of divine grace along a non-economic horizon that completes and fulfills the self rather than subjecting it to debt and obligation.

Emerson’s early essays often emphasize the optimism that power can at the very least renew dead forms if not completely transform them. But according to some scholars, there seems to be a significant shift in his writings of the early to mid-forties. Earlier in *Nature* (1836), Emerson writes that man is nourished by the unfailing fountains of spirit, from which he “draws, at his need, inexhaustible power. Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man?” (1:38). In one sense, this question is representative of Emerson’s post-clerical and early Transcendentalist writings throughout the 1830s. Man must “inhale the upper air” and see that virtue is “The golden key / Which opes [sic] the palace of eternity.” The spirit is *pneuma*, both air and breath, imparting its gifts and animating us, “the creator in the finite,” to build our own world. In “The American Scholar” Emerson admonishes the nation to wake from its sleepwalking so that a “nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the

⁴⁵ Ahlstrom writes that because of Emerson’s monism, “one can say that his ‘self-reliance’ was a kind of God-reliance” (605). For this notion of religion as binding, see Smith, *Dialogues between Faith and Reason*, p. 18-19.

Divine Soul which also inspires all men” (70). In “The Divinity School Address” he attempts to revive the gifts of moral sentiment and revelation in worship, to “remedy their deformity” from a “whole popedom of forms” by means of “first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul” (92). Throughout his *Essays: First Series* (1841), a similar disdain for form and emphasis on spirit, genius, virtue, all manifestations of power, can be summed up as, “The only sin is limitation” (“Circles” 182). However, just a few years later with *Essays: Second Series* (1844), critics have often noted the sharp departure in tone and mood, most prominent in the second essay “Experience.”⁴⁶ Instead of “the golden key” in *Nature* that unlocks spiritual power to overcome the limitations of finite form, man is in this later essay “a golden impossibility,” charged to mediate the excesses of power and form. By turning next to a close reading of “Experience,” I want to examine what this golden impossibility is and what it signals in Emerson’s understanding of dynamic gifts.

*All I know is reception; I am and I have: but I do not get,
and when I have fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not.*⁴⁷

“Experience,” I will argue, is about the flow of dynamic gifts. More precisely, *what we call experience is the flow of dynamic gifts that mediate the reception of infinite power in finite form*. And because experience is always mediated by language, there

⁴⁶ See Porte, *Uses of Literature*, pp. 85-114; Packer, “Ralph Waldo Emerson,” pp. 381-398; and Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, pp. 3-26.

⁴⁷ From “Experience” vol. 3, p. 48.

are particular modes of rhetoric that either close or disclose dynamic gifts of power. Beyond the simple understanding of rhetoric as a productive art, this points to the receptive or hermeneutic dimension of rhetoric. At a key moment in the essay, Emerson states that the gifts of power are not self-generated, but received from the divine or infinite sources of the self. All of human life and experience comes by “the grace of God,” which he interprets as a “vital force supplied from the Eternal”:

The ardors of piety agree at last with the coldest skepticism, —that nothing is of us or our works, —that all is of God. Nature will not spare us the smallest leaf of laurel. All writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing and having. I would gladly be moral, and keep due metes and bounds, which I dearly love, and allow the most to the will of man, but I have set my heart on honesty in this chapter, and I can see nothing at last, in success or failure, than more or less of vital force supplied from the Eternal. (3:40)

Experience, then, at least the kind Emerson seeks in the essay, is the reception of this vital force or dynamic power. Likewise, the epigraph above about reception appears in the last section of the essay where the passage continues:

My reception has been so large, that I am not annoyed by receiving this or that superabundantly. I say to the Genius, if he will pardon the proverb, *In for a mill, in for a million*. When I receive a new gift, I do not macerate my body to make the account square, for, if I should die, I could not make the account square. The benefit overran the merit the first day, and has overrun the merit ever since. The merit itself, so-called, I reckon part of the receiving. (48)

Here again as in previous essays, Emerson is trying to think a reception of gifts without the kind of indebtedness that results in resentment or self-maceration.⁴⁸ If the shape of gift-flowing is circular, then the central figure of debt-paying is the square, whose points can be analyzed and their distance equally measured. A debt is squared when benefit and merit can be accounted for and returned. But the benefit of the kind of gift Emerson receives overruns the merit super-abundantly, its reception so large that it exceeds accounting. A thousandth part (mill, 0.001) somehow opens up into a thousand “squared” (million).

The reception of the gifts of experience exceeds accounting because “The results of life,” Emerson writes earlier, “are uncalculated and uncalculable” (40). “Nature hates calculators” and the “great gifts are not got by analysis” (39, 36).⁴⁹ What this suggests is there are certain modes of experience such as analysis that closes off the reception of gifts. For analysis, the taking apart of something for the purpose of examining it, is the opposite of reliance and religion defined already as the binding of the self together with a dynamic whole. Analysis results in the disintegration of reliance and, thereby, in the loss of self and being sold into debt: “When I come to that, the doctors shall buy me for a cent.—‘But, sir, medical history; the report to the Institute; the proven facts!’” to which Emerson replies, “I distrust the facts and the inferences” (32). The context of this passage is about the “trap of the so-called sciences” that analyzes the structure of human temperament and “shuts us in a prison of glass which we cannot

⁴⁸ Emerson revises the English proverb, “In for a penny, in for a pound,” which originally suggested that the penalty for failing to repay either amount is equally severe. Emerson likely relied on a copy of Henry Bohn’s *A Hand-book of Proverbs*; see Loomis, “Emerson’s Proverbs,” p. 260.

⁴⁹ The great gifts Emerson identifies in the passage are life, spirit, and poetry.

see” (31).⁵⁰ When Emerson grieves that “grief can teach me nothing,” he is stating not a conclusion about experience as such, but a problem resulting from a particular mode of experience, from too much analysis whose consequence is that “souls never touch their objects” (29). This “evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers” result “when we clutch hardest.” “Do not craze yourself with thinking,” Emerson continues, for “Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy. Its chief good is for well-mixed people who can enjoy what they find, without question” (35). The problem with analysis as a particular mode of thinking about experience is that it differentiates and opens up a gulf between subject and object. In such a horizon, “There will be the same gulf between every me and thee, as between the original and picture” (44).⁵¹ And if “souls never touch their objects” because of this gulf, there can be no dynamic flow of power.

But as we already saw in the essay “Gifts” which appears in the same volume as “Experience,” Emerson imagines an alternative horizon that overcomes the traps and glass prisons: “Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. We need change of objects” (32). The kind of static permanence that results from what Emerson calls

⁵⁰ Temperament etymologically means a correct mixture. In classical virtue ethics, temperance or moderation (*sophrosune*) is the well-mixed person, which will be examined more carefully later. What Emerson objects to here is a science of temperament that attempts to determine and therefore fix human personality via scientific analysis.

⁵¹ This quotation, among others, highlights for me the strong affinities between Emerson and Gadamer, whose work, along with Paul Tillich’s, has influenced this reading of Emerson. For Gadamer’s argument against differentiating analytically between original and picture, as a model of my reading of Emerson, see *Truth and Method*, pp. 130-152. For an example of Tillich’s attempt to mediate the infinite and finite, see his section on “Being and Finitude,” *Systematic Theology: Volume 1*, pp. 186-204.

analysis and calculators is contrasted with the organic metaphor of circulation, which ought to remind us again of the circle as another key figure for flowing. Against the gulf that appears in analysis between every me and thee, there is another mode of experience that “fill[s] up the vacancy between heaven and earth”:

Fortune, Minerva, Muse, Holy Ghost, — these are quaint names, too narrow to cover this unbounded substance. The baffled intellect must still kneel before this cause, which refuses to be named, — ineffable cause, which every fine genius has essayed to represent by some emphatic symbol, as, Thales by water, Anaximenes by air, Anaxagoras by (Nous) thought, Zoroaster by fire, Jesus and the moderns by love: and the metaphor of each has become a national religion. The Chinese Mencius has not been the least successful in his generalization. "I fully understand language," he said, "and nourish well my vast-flowing vigor." — "I beg to ask what you call vast-flowing vigor?" said his companion. "The explanation," replied Mencius, "is difficult. This vigor is supremely great, and in the highest degree unbending. Nourish it correctly, and do it no injury, and it will fill up the vacancy between heaven and earth. This vigor accords with and assists justice and reason, and leaves no hunger." In our more correct writing, we give to this generalization the name of Being, and thereby confess that we have arrived as far as we can go. Suffice it for the joy of the universe, that we have not arrived at a wall, but at interminable oceans. *Our life seems not present, so much as prospective; not for the affairs on which it is wasted, but as a hint of this vast-flowing vigor.* (42, italics mine)

In this remarkable passage, we again see Emerson using the metaphor of flowing as a way to mediate the vacancy between subject and object. The flow is also a vigor or power like the gift of the Holy Ghost, which among others he says is a quaint name for the infinite or what he calls an “ineffable cause” and “unbounded substance.” This is an example where Emerson seems to depart from traditional forms of theism. And according to the Mencius quotation, nourishing this vast-flowing vigor is closely connected to understanding something about language. If earlier we argued that Emerson translates a pneumatology into a broader theory of dynamic gifts, here we see even more clearly the movement from a broader theology of religious symbols to a fundamental ontology that points not to the presence of Being, but to its *prospective*. Emerson says, “we have not arrived at a wall, but at interminable oceans.” The various names of God, including all the ones Emerson uses, are but metaphors for this infinite prospective of Being, and in this passage, Being is collapsed into neither a subject nor an objectified other like a wall. Were they completely identical, there would not be enough distance for anything like the flow of gifts. And while prospective suggests distance, there is no unbridgeable chasm in between. Instead, “the unbounded substance” and “the baffled intellect,” without being collapsed into a single entity, are mediated by something like the flow of ocean water. More precisely, what flows between is a “vast-flowing vigor” that might also be called the flow of dynamic power.

The experience of this dynamic vigor or power is not appropriated through analysis but through a particular mode of language Emerson calls *illumination*:

Do but observe the mode of our illumination. When I converse with a profound mind, or if at any time being alone I have good thoughts, I do not at once arrive at

satisfactions, as when, being thirsty, I drink water, or go to the fire, being cold: no! but I am at first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose, as if the clouds that covered it parted at intervals, and showed the approaching traveller the inland mountains, with the tranquil eternal meadows spread at their base, whereon flocks graze, and shepherds pipe and dance. But every insight from this realm of thought is felt as initial, and promises a sequel. *I do not make it; I arrive there, and behold what was there already. I make! O no! I clap my hands in infantine joy and amazement, before the first opening to me of this august magnificence, old with the love and homage of innumerable ages, young with the life of life, the sunbright Mecca of the desert. And what a future it opens! I feel a new heart beating with the love of the new beauty.* (41, italics mine)

Like the prospective of Being, what illumination discloses are not satisfactions but further regions of and sequels to the infinite sources of Being. This experience of illumination, what he describes as infantine joy and amazement, I read as a description of the flow of dynamic gifts, here represented by the gifts of genius, beauty, and love that open up futures and empower those who “arrive there, and behold what was there already.” This passage immediately precedes the extended passage above about the vast-flowing vigor. Thus, illumination opens up the reception of power that flows from an infinite prospective. Illumination, not analysis, is the mode by which dynamic gifts are disclosed. And although it is a metaphor of sight, both this and the previous passage

emphasize that illumination takes place through language, through conversation, reading, and thinking.

Experience is always mediated by language, and for Emerson there are right and wrong ways to converse, read, and think about experience.⁵² Illumination is a particular rhetorical mode that discloses dynamic gifts, whereas analysis is another that instead covers them up. Every experience, like every gift, can be analyzed, but doing so leaves us with only what we make, rather than the reception of what the passage describes as an arrival there, an opening of magnificence, or the feeling of a new heart. Indeed, at the heart of "Experience" (as with so many of his other essays) is Emerson's preoccupation with how much finite beings can transcend things of their own making, whether experience can open us up to something like a reception of gifts from an infinite prospective of Being.

This last distinction between receiving gifts and making things, however, deserves more careful attention. Even if Emerson sometimes sharpens the contrast as in the last passage, it would be unfair to say simply that receiving and making are somehow diametrically opposed to each other. If we really treat these as two different rhetorical modes, as I think Emerson does, then we must say that the reception of dynamic gifts is also a kind of making through language. It is a rhetorical hermeneutics; it is both receptive and productive. The reception of dynamic gifts comes from the experience or illumination of an infinite prospective of Being, which is always mediated

⁵² See, for example, Emerson's famous statement about books: "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire" ("The American Scholar" 1837; 1:56). For other essays that address right and wrong ways to converse and think, see "Friendship" and "Circles."

by the making of language or *poiesis*. Because there is no access to the infinite without the finite, there is also no reception without a making, no experience without language, no dynamic power without poetic form. Thus, the fundamental difference between illumination and analysis is not simply between receiving and making. Instead, what is at stake for Emerson is in a sense a matter of phenomenological style. How we speak conditions what we experience in life. What matters is whether our experience-through-language gets us in touch or dynamic flow with the infinite prospective of Being, or whether it borrows at second or third hand from someone else's experiences. The first results in more power, inspiration, and agency, but the second leaves us in debt, conformity, and the loss of self-reliance.

This is why for Emerson the ultimate intermediaries of dynamic gifts are the ideal figures of the poet and preacher, even as he claims not yet to have found either. The poet, drawing on divine sources beyond the self or what may now be better called the infinite prospective of Being, is "the Namer, or Language-maker," the one who "stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and, following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature [...] He uses forms according to the life, and not according to the form" ("The Poet" 3:12-13). Notice how carefully Emerson describes the poet's mediation of the dynamic flow between power and form. The poet stands one step closer, just enough to see the flowing of power in (and never apart from) every finite form that drives from within not the abandonment of form, but its transformation or ascension into higher forms.

What Emerson says about the quality of the poetic imagination, which again “is to flow, and not to freeze” (20), can also be said about the quality of preaching: “The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life,—life passed through the fire of thought” (“Divinity School Address” 1:86). Although there is no thought without life, Emerson makes clear that some thoughts like those borrowed from others are further removed from the infinite sources and dynamic gifts of life: “Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshipper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us” (85). By a formalist, Emerson does not mean some kind of vacant form completely devoid of power. However much form might cover up power, “There is a good ear, in some men, that draws supplies to virtue out of very indifferent nutriment. There is poetic truth concealed in all the commonplaces of prayer and of sermons, and though foolishly spoken, they may be wisely heard; for, each is some select expression that broke out in a moment of piety from some stricken or jubilant soul, and its excellency made it remembered” (86).

However, the preacher and the poet “on whom the soul descends, through whom the soul speaks,” stand as principle intermediaries of the flow of dynamic gifts. The soul speaks *through* the preacher’s sermon and the poet’s poem. Again, Emerson insists on mediating without collapsing the subject and object. Subjects are endowed with “the gift of tongues,” which should now be understood as a gift that flows through individuals and empowers them to bear witness to the infinite prospective of Being by means of finite

human languages (84).⁵³ At their best they do not merely analyze what others have said, but they mediate the infinite and finite in such a way that gives us back more fully to ourselves: “Poets are thus liberating gods,” Emerson tells us twice, and “we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene” (“The Poet” 3:17-19). On a more fundamental level, the poet and preacher are essentially the same gifted figure: “The religions of the world are the ejaculations of a few imaginative [e.g. poetic] men” (20). There is a sense that originally religion and poetry, both of which are bound up with rhetoric, are inextricably connected for Emerson. They are all ultimately responses to a specific notion of experience as the reception of dynamic gifts that empower individuals with sources of power to ascend to higher forms of themselves. The office of what Emerson variously calls the true poet, preacher, or prophet, the genius and the scholar, is to mediate dynamic gifts that give us more fully to ourselves and empower us to transform our experiences of the infinite prospective of Being into finite and therefore revisable forms of power.

Throughout this chapter, I have framed Emerson’s theory of dynamic gifts as a question about how to mediate without collapsing the divine and human, between sources of infinite power and finite forms such as human languages, practices, or institutions. And mediated they must be. It was, after all, too much emphasis on finite religious forms such as the Lord’s Supper that caused Emerson to leave the church. And though he often seems to emphasize spiritual and individual powers at the expense

⁵³ In the Pentecost event, the gift of tongues enables the disciples to speak about “the wonderful works of God” in various human languages or what the Greek calls *dialektos* (See Acts 2:1-13, KJV).

of form, Emerson, though not as carefully as he should, does insist that religious or aesthetic form is also indispensable.⁵⁴ While infinite power may be more than its finite form, there is no power apart from its incarnation. Emerson searches for the true preacher and poet and not just their gifts. They are mediated in a kind of flow that makes it impossible to separate. In “Experience” Emerson emphasizes perhaps more clearly than in previous essays how one without the other only results in contradiction: “Human life is made up of the two elements, power and form, and the proportion must be invariably kept if we would have it sweet and sound. Each of these elements in excess makes a mischief as hurtful as its defect. Everything runs to excess; every good quality is noxious if unmixed” (38). What Emerson holds up here is a version of the ethical (Aristotelian) and aesthetic (Horatian) ideal of the golden mean.⁵⁵ He expands the ancient notion of virtue and beauty to a broader conception of the gifts of life or experience. “The middle region of our being,” he says, “is the temperate zone” (36). And temperate here alludes to the classical ideal of temperance as not simply moderation but more precisely mixture or flow in contrast to the science and analysis of temperament examined earlier. Thus, at either side of this temperate zone, “We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that

⁵⁴ See for example the end of the “Divinity School Address” (1838): “The evils of the church that now are manifest. The question returns, What shall we do? I confess, all attempts to project and establish a Cultus with new rites and forms, seem to me vain. Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms. All attempts to contrive a system are as cold as the new worship introduced by the French to the goddess of Reason—to-day, pasteboard and filigree, and ending to-morrow in madness and murder. Rather let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For if once you are alive, you shall find they shall become plastic and new. The remedy to their deformity is first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul” (1:92).

⁵⁵ For another discussion of Emerson’s revision of the golden mean, see Walls, *Emerson’s Life in Science*, pp. 154-156.

of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry, —a narrow belt.” Most importantly, life, thought, spirit, and poetry are described in the very same passage as the kinds of “great gifts [that] are not got by analysis.” The experience or illumination of these gifts mediate the flow of infinite power in finite form.

But we cannot simply conclude here by saying Emerson attempts to overcome dualism by locating a golden mean. This I think is part of what makes reading this essay so difficult and at the same time rewarding. As soon as Emerson establishes one principle, he quickly undermines it for another that could not be established without the prior negation.⁵⁶ The essay begins by establishing a dualism between souls and objects: e.g. his inability to grieve the death of his son. This dualism opens up a chasm that he then tries to mediate by emphasizing circulation and mixture. But the problem with the golden mean conclusion is the same as the problem with analysis earlier. If there is such a thing as a golden mean between the extremes of power and form, then this suggests that all one needs to do is to locate both poles and calculate the distance between. And if dynamic gifts can be so easily calculated, they can also be commoditized back again in a horizon of exchange. Can life, spirit, or poetry be defined by means of such simple algebra? The mathematical and spatial metaphor is not only problematic, but also illusory because like virtue, for Emerson, experience cannot be mapped and measured as objects are:

How easily, if fate would suffer it, we might keep forever these beautiful limits,
and adjust ourselves, once for all, to the perfect calculation of the kingdom of

⁵⁶ I am thinking of Stanley Cavell’s reading of Emerson’s response to skepticism. See “Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson’s ‘Experience,’” from *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*. See also Poirier’s *Poetry and Pragmatism*.

known cause and effect. In the street and in the newspapers, life appears so plain a business, that manly resolution and adherence to the multiplication-table through all weathers, will insure success. But ah! presently comes a day—or is it only a half-hour, with its angel-whispering—which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years!” (39)

The attempt at calculating and predicting the future is futile because it presumes to know where the finite even begins and the infinite ends. Contrary to such haughty presumption, “Power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely, the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life [...] Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping, if it were not. God delights to isolate us every day, and hide from us the past and the future.” Just as the past and future are hidden from us, so are the extremes of power and form. This is essentially what the famous opening of the essay means:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series, of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair: there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. (27)

In such a situation it is impossible to calculate a golden mean. At best we can take one step higher, which gives us access not to God or Being itself, but more modestly to higher prospects of illumination, prospects of dynamic gifts to empower us to continue to ascend in the direction of infinite power. There are no extremes, no end to the number of stairs because there are no walls in either direction called God or mere thing

in this horizon of flowing. Instead, we find ourselves somewhere higher or lower in a series or flow between the infinite and finite.

Experience as the flow of dynamic gifts, therefore, occupies not some golden mean between power and form. Rather, “A man is a golden impossibility. The line he must walk is a hair’s breadth” (38-39). What does it mean that for Emerson the golden mean has become a golden impossibility? My suggestion is that the impossibility should not be read negatively.⁵⁷ That is, the impossibility signifies not an absence, but the indeterminable presence of a gap small yet large enough to enable what I have been calling a dynamic flow. It is not that there is no golden mean as such, only that the analytical standpoint from which to measure the mean is an impossibility. If there is no golden mean, even if abstractly, then there is no mediation between the two elements. Power and form are then either completely identical or entirely separate. Neither of these is true for Emerson who instead attempts to mediate without collapsing the two. The difference is but a “hair’s breadth.” What the impossibility signifies is an inability to locate the mean between power and form because, like the flow of gifts, they are already both here and there. And if it is impossible to locate power and form, instrumental attempts to manipulate power into form also become an impossibility. In other words, the golden impossibility maintains the flow of dynamic gifts, the flow of infinite power in finite form, without “that hankering after an overt or practical effect,” which he calls, “an apostasy” (48). Therefore, Emerson builds into his theory of gifts an

⁵⁷ This anticipates Derrida’s notion of “the impossibility of the gift,” which is also not for him a negative concept. The impossible, rather than simply negating the gift, makes the very condition of desire for the gift possible. In other words, it is the condition of hope, a hope for the pure gift that is not yet. See *Given Time*, p. 16; Caputo and Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, pp. 71-72, 185-187.

impossibility that prevents the instrumental exploitation of commoditized forms of power. Life is not gained by “manipular attempts to realize the world of thought,” but by the illumination or dynamic flow of an infinite prospective impossible to calculate or predict.

This notion that life as a dynamic flow between infinite power and finite form is more fluid than fixed can be found as far back as *Nature* (1836): “Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it” (1:44). What has changed since then, however, is that he is no longer so confident about where he stands in relation to what he believed would be the inevitable triumph of spirit over form. The bold proclamation at the end of *Nature*, “Build, therefore, your own world” (45), has become by 1844 a question and a challenge: “Why not realize your world?” (3:48). Where, in other words, is the evidence of the gift you claim to have received? The question might be read as indicative of Emerson’s increasing weariness perhaps after the death of his son or what seemed to be the impending failure of the Transcendentalist movement. I disagree. Instead, I read Emerson’s response to the question as a resistance to the instrumental demand for what he calls “practical effects” or “paltry empiricism.” Rather than admit defeat, Emerson still insists, “Patience and patience, we shall win at the last”:

We must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time. It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life. We dress our garden, eat our dinners, discuss the household with our wives, and these things make no impression, are forgotten next week; but, in the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity and revelations which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule, never

mind the defeat: up again, old heart!—it seems to say, —there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power. (48-49)

The romance is the transformation of genius, of dynamic gifts into not the “practical *effects*” mentioned above, but the flow of “practical *power*.” Practical effects are the evidence of instrumental and analyzable objects. Practical power is an illumination of dynamic gifts, “an insight which becomes the light of our life.” We might describe the temporal distinction in the passage as the difference between chronological and kairoic time. One can be measured and analyzed; the other surprises us like a gift, a dynamic gift that can transform in a moment our experience of life and empower us toward that which has been illuminated. The solitude to which we ought to return for such revelations describes a kind of self-reliance or self-communion, perhaps what Emerson defines elsewhere as prayer: “Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul” (“Self-Reliance” 2:44).⁵⁸ It can even serve as an appropriate figure for this rhetorical mode of illumination. Prayer discloses the flow of dynamic gifts. If earlier in the 1830s Emerson believed there to be a golden key to unlock spiritual power at will, by 1844 the image is of a more contemplative Emerson, praying then for the reception of dynamic gifts from an illumination of the infinite prospective of Being. “Where do we find ourselves?” The answer is in a golden impossibility, unable to locate a mean because we know not where we stand in relation to an end or origin no longer in sight. While such a solitary

⁵⁸ It is important to remember that prayer for Emerson is not merely an act, an event, or occasion. Instead, prayer and contemplation are the counterparts to character and action. See Emerson’s sermon on 1 Thessalonians 5:17 “Pray without ceasing” (1826) and the published essay, “Prayers” (*Dial*, 1842).

image of prayer might suggest resignation for someone else, Emerson in this same year received the power finally and hereafter unceasingly to speak out against that most commoditized institution of the gift of life that justified an economy of slavery.⁵⁹

What this understanding of experience as the reception of dynamic gifts offers, in conclusion, is an alternative to economic (namely, rational) modes of gift-exchange that always result in debt, obligation, and resentment. Rather than subtracting from our agency or self-reliance, dynamic sources of power flow from an infinite prospective of being to finite individual beings especially through the rhetorical gifts of genius (e.g. poetry, sermon, essay). Language is the medium through which the dynamic gifts of experience are received. Their reception results in higher forms of agency or spirit that enable the self to do what is otherwise difficult or impossible. This is not to say that the poet and preacher cannot be examined through the framework of economy and exchange. Such an analysis would be highly useful in uncovering ideological masks that hide material motivations.⁶⁰ But to reduce all sources of agency to economic ones would also miss an opportunity to examine alternative ways of thinking about gifts such as Emerson's. Indeed, this pneumatological perspective is precisely what is lost in most contemporary debates about the gift.

⁵⁹ See "An Address on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies" (1844).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption*; Jackson's *The Business of Letters*; and Hoeller's *From Gift to Commodity*.

CHAPTER 3

“A new sphere of power”

The Hermeneutics of Dynamic Gifts in William James

After all, what accounts do the nethermost bounds of the universe owe to me? By what insatiate conceit and lust of intellectual despotism do I arrogate the right to know their secrets, and from my philosophic throne to play the only airs they shall march to, as if I were the Lord's anointed? Is not my knowing them at all a gift and not a right? And shall it be given before they are given? Data! gifts! something to be to be thankful for! It is a gift that we can approach things at all, and, by means of the time and space of which our minds and they partake, alter our actions so as to meet them.

—William James⁶¹

I now see, as I have seen in his other books that I have read, that the aim and end of the whole business is religious.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.⁶²

In the last chapter, I began to tie together modes of rhetoric and religion that converge on the topic of the gift. Illumination, not analysis, can open up but never generate an experience of dynamic gifts that give us more fully to ourselves and empower us to do what otherwise may be difficult or even impossible. This theory of gifts is rhetorical because it insists that gifts are always mediated by modes of persuasion and metaphor. It is religious because these modes of language mediate the reception of gifts from sources beyond our rational control. And as I will argue more fully in this chapter, it is pragmatist because rather than trying to determine an ontology or epistemology of

⁶¹ “On Some Hegelisms” (1882), 1992, p. 659. In this essay reprinted in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), James argues against Hegel's philosophy of logic and right. The contrast in the passage between right and gift might lead us to describe James's alternative as a philosophy of gift.

⁶² Quoted in Hamner, *American Pragmatism*, p. 142.

these sources beyond the self, Emerson and James are more concerned about tracing their effects through us and upon the world around us.

Scholars of pragmatism have long emphasized the rhetorical aspects of James's writings.⁶³ While building on their arguments, I want to reconsider the role of religion in pragmatism by examining his hermeneutics of gifts. In doing so, I want to focus, as I did in the previous chapter, on the deep connection between the religious and the rhetorical/hermeneutic so as to avoid reducing what literary pragmatists like Emerson and James call experience to merely a private and subjective matter. As Paul Stob has argued, James believed we ought to throw our interpretations of the world into a "marketplace of ideas, wherein something like the art of rhetoric—though James never labeled it as such—is required to work through our differences" ("Terministic Screens" 237). If one of James's primary objectives for introducing pragmatism was to defend religious beliefs in a scientific age,⁶⁴ then we ought to think about the public implications of James's theory of religious experience. Contrary to some of his recent critics, whom we will focus on later, James believed religions must never remain private but be thrown into a marketplace of ideas where they ought to persuade and compete for survival.

Examining James's hermeneutics of gifts and what he calls their "dynamogenic" qualities is one way to see the essential connection between religion and pragmatism.⁶⁵ As I have in previous chapters, I will call them *dynamic gifts* defined as sources of

⁶³ See Mailloux, *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism* (1995); Gunn, "Pragmatism, rhetoric, and The American Scene" (1995); Danisch, *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric* (2007); Stob, "'Terministic Screens,' Social Constructionism, and the Language of Experience" (2008).

⁶⁴ Louis Menand has made this point especially clear in both his introduction to *Pragmatism: A Reader* and his invaluable *The Metaphysical Club*.

⁶⁵ Dynamogenic is a term he used to mean forms of empowerment or energy, e.g. "second wind" (*Writings* 1987; 1226-7).

power, inspiration, and agency that we do not generate. And it is a concept that appears throughout his philosophical and religious writings. As Alan Schrift has claimed, the gift is “one of the primary focal points at which contemporary disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses intersect” (*The Logic of the Gift* 3). Hildegard Holler argues this is so because “Gift theory from its inception has recognized that it must grapple with this double nature of the gift—its real manifestations as a cultural and economic practice that governs human relations and communities and its powerful existence as a site of hope, faith, even fantasy” (*From Gift to Commodity* 5). If Schrift and Hoeller are right, then it should not surprise us that studying James’s rhetorical hermeneutics of gifts can be a useful bridge across the many disciplinary boundaries he crossed. To say there is something called a language of gifts operative in James’s writings is more than claiming he used the word “gift” often or even in interesting figurative ways. A close reading of such language can help establish the very rhetorical and hermeneutical nature of pragmatism as a method to track the phenomenon of gifts. For gifts are always mediated and conditioned by modes of persuasion and interpretation, without which they cannot be distinguished from other objects.

Although he rarely used the terms “rhetoric” or “hermeneutics,” we can see how language for James was a medium that conditions the receptivity and effectivity of dynamic gifts, what Marilee Mifsud has called “Rhetoric as Gift/Giving.” In her article, Mifsud borrows from Henry Johnstone a distinction between rhetoric as a technological process and rhetoric as creative communication:

A creative process consists of a series of steps none of which is strictly determined by its predecessors but each of which, once taken, is seen to have

been a fitting sequel to its predecessors. One salient feature of a creative process is that two or more people are cooperating, taking turns to make the step that is retrospectively seen to be appropriate. A technological process fixes in advance the relationships among the steps, and requires no cooperation between those involved in the process to accomplish its task. (100)

For Mifsud, this distinction between the technological and the creative corresponds, respectively, to rhetorical differences between the Athenian polis economy and the Homeric gift economy. Rhetoric in the polis economy operates “in an ethic of abstraction, approaching its situation with a fundamental distance between self and other. In this distance, the other’s assent becomes regarded as a commodity to secure, and rhetorical *techne* the tools for the task.” In a gift economy, however, “we can imagine it [rhetoric] not so much a tool but a gift. We can suppose rhetoric as a gift to be creative, intimate, memorable, luxurious, and liberal. Creativity is the antinomy of technical procedure” (101). This notion of rhetoric as gift becomes a fundamental openness to and cooperation with the other. It is less agonistic and more hospitable. Although rhetoric in a gift economy can release creativity and cooperation, Mifsud warns against romanticizing the gift too much since “Gift recipients in a gift economy can become burdened by the debt of compulsory reciprocity and obligatory exchange.” Instead, she suggests that the contrast between these two economies and their rhetorics can result in an experience of alterity that “becomes generative of new theoretical directions for rhetoric, so as to get out of the historical trappings of both the gift and polis economies.” If we can escape these various trappings, we must have an answer to the following questions: “Can the gift be aneconomic? Can we imagine giving,

not figured through cycles of obligatory return, i.e., not savings, but squander; not return, but release?" (102). While Mifsud looks to "the demand in writing for excess" that can be found in Derrida and Cixous, I want to demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter how James also offers a way to think about a rhetorical hermeneutics of gifts in terms not of indebtedness but of empowerment. For James, the gift is dynamic. It is a source of empowerment always mediated by modes of language that condition the gift's reception and effects. And nowhere does James see this rhetoric and hermeneutics of dynamic gifts more clearly than in an openness to and cooperation with a power that comes to us like a gift from sources beyond ourselves impossible to determine in advance.

Before coming back to this question of rhetoric as an aneconomic gift in the conclusion, I will first show how the pragmatist preoccupation with power is related to the religious experience of gifts. To account for such experiences, James develops a theory of consciousness that reveals just how fundamental language is in mediating the dynamic gifts of experience. This theory gives us another way to think about rhetoric as a gift that opens us to dynamic sources of power beyond our rational control. By analyzing how language functions in this way, I will argue not only that pragmatism, at least for James, is in an important sense always a *religious* pragmatism, but also that this religious pragmatism has deep rhetorical and hermeneutic (therefore public) implications. Understanding such implications can help correct widespread criticism that James's notion of religion is entirely and only private and subjective. After establishing these claims by reading the text closely, I will return to address two such critics, Richard

Rorty and Charles Taylor, who are among the most recognizable figures to miss the rhetorical hermeneutic dimensions of James's religious pragmatism.

Religious feeling is thus an absolute addition to the Subject's range of life.

*It gives him a new sphere of power.*⁶⁶

That power is one of James's key terms should be unsurprising. It is a term not only relevant to pragmatism's emphasis on effects, but also inextricably tied to what he called a science of religion or what would later be called a phenomenology of religion.⁶⁷ In *Pragmatism* (1907), James defines his philosophy as a method and theory of truth that among other things help to overcome inaction resulting from metaphysical disputes—most notably between religion and science. As a theory of truth, pragmatism rejects a correspondence view for an instrumental one. From our finite and fallible perspective, truths are formed rather than found but never in an arbitrary manner. When older truths are modified to incorporate newer ones, the process should be described as not revolutionary, but evolutionary in that the new is always “grafted” onto the old. In other words, it is not enough simply to assert that one has discovered a new truth. Every new or modified claim to truth must make sense in light of other already accepted truths. Only against the background of inherited truths can the new make any sense. As a method, pragmatism turns away from “a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional

⁶⁶ *Writings: 1902-1910* (1987), p. 50. All citations of James's writings will come from this edition unless indicated otherwise.

⁶⁷ See Richardson's *William James*, p. 304 on the influence James's work on psychology had on Edmund Husserl.

philosophers,” namely, the reliance on “fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins” (509). Instead, it “turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action,” all of which ultimately reflect pragmatism’s turn “towards power.” This last term should sit near, if not at, the center of what pragmatism is all about.⁶⁸

What may perhaps be surprising to some, however, is how closely James associates this pragmatist notion of power with religious experience. While such a theory and method can have wide implications, James more narrowly suggests both in his first lecture and near the end of the second one, that the central aim of pragmatism is to widen “the field of search for God” (522). In other words, James does not separate the pragmatic turn towards power from the widening search for religious sources. Rather, pragmatism is fundamentally about being open to the reception of power from a wider religious field. It opens up, what he calls in *Varieties*, the “that by which we live” that both dogmatic rationalism and materialistic empiricism cut off (175). This aspect of James’s pragmatism, I will argue, becomes more than a method and theory of truth; it offers its own religious beliefs about human agency and history. Thus, what I am examining is not simply the application of pragmatism to the topic of religion, but more strongly a synthesis of religion and pragmatism. In other words, pragmatism for James is in an important sense a religious pragmatism. Before looking at the final chapter of *Pragmatism* where this religious synthesis takes place, it is necessary first to focus on *Varieties* to examine more carefully this relationship between pragmatic power and the religious field.

⁶⁸ See West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*; Poirier, *Pragmatism and Poetry*; and Lopez, *Emerson and Power*.

For James there is no contradiction in his concern for both pragmatic power and religious sources. Rather he builds into his definition of religion the very notion of power. In the chapter “Circumscription of the Topic,” James begins his definition as, “Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*” (36). However, after some considerations on what might be considered divine, James modifies this first definition several times demonstrating pragmatism’s evolutionary theory of truth. Religion is next defined as a “total reaction upon life” (39), a reaction he then specifies as solemn and grave (42), instead of the “vain chatter” of Voltaire and Renan or the “sick shrieking” of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Then after a further distinction between religion and what he calls the “athletic attitude” of moralism (49), James finally settles on the key definition of religious feeling as “an absolute addition to the subject’s range of life. *It gives him a new sphere of power. When the outward battle is lost, and the outer world disowns him, it redeems and vivifies an interior world which otherwise would be an empty waste*” (50, italics mine). Power here means personal empowerment.⁶⁹ And in my reading of

⁶⁹ The context makes clear that power as James uses the term does not mean political power-relations. However, even though he avoids in *Varieties* a historical study of religious institutions, traditions, and dogma, what James calls religious power is not entirely irrelevant to what Steven Mailloux has called rhetorical power, which examines “how various discourses—literary, critical, and theoretical—function in producing the specific historical effects they do” (*Rhetorical Power* xii). Although James is primarily concerned with the ways an individual’s “interior world” is empowered to face contingency and meaninglessness, he is also concerned about their profound historical implications. This point will be developed later, but the misleading opposition between the private and the public has resulted in criticism of James’s politics. For Cornel West, another religious pragmatist, James’s libertarian and cosmopolitan perspective “is one of political impotence, yet it buttresses moral integrity and promotes the exercise of

Varieties, all the subsequent lectures on the divided-self, conversion, saintliness, and mysticism are studies on various manifestations of religion as a source of power.

What makes this understanding of power particularly religious is the way James ties it with a religious notion of the gift. In the sentences immediately preceding his key definition of religion, James writes,

Like love, like wrath, like hope, ambition, jealousy, like every other instinctive eagerness and impulse, it [religion] adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else. This enchantment, coming as a gift when it does come—a gift of our organism, the physiologists will tell us, a gift of God's grace, the theologians say—is either there or not there for us, and there are persons who can no more become possessed by it than they can fall in love with a given woman by mere word of command.⁷⁰

individual conscience" (*American Evasion* 60). For a similar criticism, see also Posnock, "The Influence of William James on American Culture."

⁷⁰ Here is another related passage from the chapter on "The Sick Soul": "Whatever of value, interest, or meaning our respective worlds may appear endowed with are thus pure gifts of the spectator's mind. The passion of love is the most familiar and extreme example of this fact. If it comes, it comes; if it does not come, no process of reasoning can force it. Yet it transforms the value of the creature loved as utterly as the sunrise transforms Mont Blanc from a corpse-like gray to a rosy enchantment; and it sets the whole world to a new tune for the lover and gives a new issue to his life. So with fear, with indignation, jealousy, ambition, worship. If they are there, life changes. And whether they shall be there or not depends almost always upon non-logical, often on organic conditions. And as the excited interest which these passions put into the world is our gift to the world, just so are the passions themselves gifts,—gifts to us, from sources sometimes low and sometimes high; but almost always non-logical and beyond our control. How can the moribund old man reason back to himself the romance, the mystery, the imminence of great things with which our old earth tingled for him in the days when he was young and well? Gifts, either of the flesh or of the spirit; and the spirit bloweth where it listeth; and the world's materials lend their surface passively to all the gifts alike, as the stage-setting receives indifferently whatever alternating colored lights may be shed upon it from the optical apparatus in the gallery" (141). I include this extended passage because no one has given much thought to James's language of

There are two important points from this passage I will examine in more detail later and only highlight briefly now. The first is rhetorical and the second is psychological, or better yet, phenomenological. James first claims that enchantment or religious power is not something that can be “rationally or logically deducible,” nor will it appear “by mere word of command.” One can only receive this kind of empowering enchantment like the reception of what I have been calling a dynamic gift (e.g., a gift that empowers).

Although this might suggest that gifts are independent of rhetoric, we will see more precisely how for James language always mediates, even if it never generates, the reception of dynamic gifts. Between rhetoric and phenomenology is hermeneutics.⁷¹

The second point about the phenomenal appearance of these gifts is interesting because James equivocates about whether the source of dynamic gifts is in human physiology or in the divine. While the ambiguity is, I argue, intentional, it is not a reflection of some struggle with secular disenchantment. Whether the source is theological or not, James nevertheless considers dynamic gifts to be religious. In other words, religion to the pragmatist is not deciding conclusively about its source. Rather, it is an openness to the reception and effects of dynamic gifts, whose sources may be physiological or divine, but nevertheless remain for James religious. In order to explain this, he develops a psychological theory that has deep rhetorical and hermeneutic implications to account for the appearance and effects of such phenomena. It is, after

gifts. Forms of value, interest, and meaning such as love are “pure gifts” that can change our lives. Their source might be in the flesh or the spirit, but in either case they are “non-logical and beyond our control.”

⁷¹ For other work combining these three traditions, see Gadamer *Truth and Method* and Mailloux *Disciplinary Identities*.

all, a pragmatist definition of religion. Before I examine these points further, let me emphasize the importance of the key passage above.

Because James's definition of religion evolves in the chapter, more attention should be given to this notion of religion as opening a new sphere of dynamic gifts than to the initial italicized definition of religion as "*feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [...] in relation to whatever they may consider divine*" (36).⁷² It is not that these two definitions are contradictory. But the notion of religious power clarifies more specifically what kinds of feelings, acts, and experiences James is pragmatically interested in. Furthermore, if we take the later passage as James's key definition, we can see how the concept of power is for him closely related to the notion of a gift. Put together, religion is the feelings, acts, and experiences of a new gift of power. If power means personal empowerment, then James, by using the gift as a metaphor for its coming, suggests that the will to power is not self-generated, even if, as we will see, its reception is conditioned by a kind of *hermeneutic anticipation*. Because pragmatism emphasizes the effects of power so much, it is often easy to miss the fundamental giftedness of power.

⁷² I am responding here to well-known criticism of James's vague definition of religion. Though I agree that he opens himself to such criticism, some of the exaggerated claims can be corrected with a more careful reading. For example, Rorty criticizes James's vague notion of religion as a "total reaction upon life," which inconsistently includes the likes of Emerson while excluding others like Nietzsche. But the paragraph right after James introduces this definition begins, "But so very broad a use of the word 'religion' would be inconvenient, however defensible it might remain on logical grounds" (40). And then a couple pages later, he revises his definition again: "So I propose—arbitrarily again, if you please—to narrow our definition once more" (42). In my count, James revises a prior generalization about religion no less than nine times in this chapter. For Rorty's criticism, see "Some Inconsistencies in James's Varieties" in Proudfoot, *William James and a Science of Religions*, which is an indispensable volume of essays on *Varieties*. Proudfoot states in the introduction that scholars in various fields have neglected *Varieties* despite its wide-ranging influence.

In works both before and after *Varieties*, James uses this term gift to describe phenomena that we do not master and control. An early example is James's use of this trope in an address to Harvard Divinity students called "The Dilemma of Determinism" (1884).⁷³ In this essay, gift means the opposite of philosophical determinism. However much conditioned, the universe is nevertheless contingent and open. Hence, gift is another word for freedom or chance:

Let us not fear to shout it from the house-tops if need be; for we now know that the idea of chance is, at bottom, exactly the same thing as the idea of gift—the one simply being a disparaging, and the other a eulogistic, name for anything on which we have no effective *claim*. And whether the world be the better or the worse for having either chances or gifts in it will depend altogether on *what* these uncertain and unclaimable things turn out to be. (*Writings* 1992; 576)⁷⁴

Notice again that in order to determine whether gifts make the world better or worse, we do not seek to know whether their origins are divine or diabolic. Rather, we can only know what *kind* of gifts they are by how they turn out to be. All that we know about their origins is that we have no effective claim on them. That is, none of our theories or theologies correspond completely to the world: "no part of the world, however big, can claim to control absolutely the destinies of the whole." This emphasis on parts is a

⁷³ First published in the *Unitarian Review* (Sept. 1884) and later reprinted as in *The Will to Believe* (1897).

⁷⁴ Here James emphasizes that we have no claim on gifts, but in *Varieties* James will modify not only the gift's claim on us, but also our partial interpretive claim on the gift's manifestation. Gadamer's reflection on the Kierkegaardian notion of claim is helpful here: "A claim is something lasting [...] but the concept of a claim also implies that it is not itself a fixed demand, the fulfillment of which is agreed on by both sides, but is rather the ground for such" (*Truth and Method* 123). It might be helpful to note that this reading of James highlights an affinity to Gadamer and what Merold Westphal (*Overcoming Onto-Theology*) has called a "hermeneutics of finitude."

central theme from his earliest work on psychology to his last publication of “A Pluralistic Mystic” (1910). And nowhere does James critique the metonymical reduction more strongly than his theory of truth in *Pragmatism*: “It would be an obvious absurdity if such ways of taking the universe [e.g. Platonic, Lockean, Hegelian, etc.] were actually true” (503). The world, despite our theories, “stands there indefeasibly: a gift which can’t be taken back” (527). The gift here points to the unclaimable givenness of our existential being in the world. Truth may be instrumentally formed, says James, but it is always formed in negotiation with the world or the unclaimable gifts already given. Thus, pragmatic truths are never arbitrary even if they are revisable.

This philosophical notion of the world as a gift is for James an extension of one of his principles of psychology, namely, that the conscious, rational self plays only a part, along with the subconscious, in conditioning one’s total being. To some people are given unclaimable gifts from the subconscious that can shift their consciousness and open up possibilities otherwise not there. In *Varieties*, conversion is what James calls the shift from a divided to a unified consciousness:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about. (177)

In addition to equivocating again about its sources, this pragmatic definition of conversion moves the emphasis from intellectual or institutional assent to the experience of religion, which is synonymous with the reception of grace. Thus, the lectures on conversion lay out in a sense a theory of the reception of dynamic gifts.

If consciousness can shift with conversion, it proves consciousness is nothing more than the forming and reforming of associations or habits. When certain mental associations are sustained, these habits constitute what we call character. Aspects of character that feel fixed are only long held habits of association. Within our broader habits of association or character, there are certain “centres of our dynamic energy” that render other associations out to the margins:

It makes a great difference to a man whether one set of his ideas, or another, be the centre of his energy; and it makes a great difference, as regards any set of ideas which he may possess, whether they become central or remain peripheral in him. To say that a man is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy. (183)

When certain ideas become the center, others do not simply disappear. Instead, peripheral ideas are organized along, we might say, a horizon that is nevertheless tinged by the center. However, the direction of influence moves both ways. Even when, for example, religious ideas remain peripheral, they are not necessarily ineffective. Our general field or horizon of consciousness includes not only the habitual centers of our energy, but also margins, which like a “magnetic field” help “both to guide our behavior and to determine the next movement of our attention” (214). While the margin itself is

not fully determinable, James points to studies suggesting that aside from the usual center and margin, there might be “an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are *extra-marginal and outside the primary consciousness altogether*, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs” (215, italics mine). This extra-marginal field is also called the subliminal or the subconscious. The subliminal memories, thoughts, and feelings here do not refer to preexisting ideas in some Platonic world of forms, but for the most part to things accumulated through sensory experience. Most of what we experience slips from “primary consciousness” (both center and margin) into the subconscious (extra-marginal field). And if experiences can slip into the subconscious, they of course can return. If they do, they do so in often abrupt and spontaneous ways in the form of “uprushes,” “bursts of energy,” and “power,” which he says are akin to the theological experiences of redemption, salvation, or peace. Underlying all these terms is, as he calls them, a “dynamogenic quality (to use the slang of the psychologists), that enables them to burst their shell, and make irruption efficaciously into life” (161). When these dynamogenic irruptions take place, they often shift or convert one’s horizon of consciousness. According to this model, James hypothesizes that the source of religious power might be in the subconscious. Some have an active and “large subliminal region,” from which incursions more frequently take place (231). But even if others have a less active subliminal region—that is, “if his conscious fields have a hard rind of a margin that resists incursions from beyond it”—this only means that “his conversion must be gradual if it occur, and must resemble any simple growth into new habits” (223). This psychological difference between sudden

and gradual conversions might be what separates in James's view a religious experience from an athletic moralism. If so, it highlights again a definition of religion as the incursion, experience, or reception of power.

That James divides consciousness from the usual dual structure of center and margin into a tripartite center, margin, and extra-marginal field seems arbitrary and motivated.⁷⁵ Indeed, James goes on to say that his intention is to open up the *possibility* of incursions from non-sensory supernatural sources:

[I]f you, being orthodox Christians, ask me as a psychologist whether the reference of a phenomenon to a subliminal self does not exclude the notion of the direct presence of the Deity altogether, I have to say frankly that as a psychologist I do not see why it necessarily should. The lower manifestations of the Subliminal, indeed, fall within the resources of the personal subject: his ordinary self-material, inattentively taken in and subconsciously remembered and combined, will account for all his usual automatisms. But just as our primary wide-awake consciousness throws open our sense to the touch of things material, so it is logically conceivable that *if there be* higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so *might be* our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them. The hubbub of the waking life might close a door which in the dreamy Subliminal might remain ajar or open. (223)

⁷⁵ See Taves, "The Fragmentation of Consciousness," which is included in an indispensable volume of essays on *Varieties*, edited by Proudfoot, *William James and the Science of Religions*. Proudfoot states in the introduction that scholars in various fields have neglected *Varieties* despite its wide-ranging influence. Taves reads James's theory of the extramarginal in the context of the psychological literature at the time.

James's rhetorical positioning here carefully as a psychologist reflects the pragmatist method that in his view ought to maintain the subjunctive ambiguity between possibility and doubt. Earlier in his first lecture on "Religion and Neurology," James already set this up by revising one psychological conclusion that religious experiences are nothing but symptoms of neurosis. Instead, he writes, "If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish *the chief condition* of the requisite receptivity" (31, italics mine). James is not saying there exists a higher realm or supernatural agent. Rather, he is applying the pragmatic method of revising absolute conclusions into tentative conditions. Thus, James's concern is not to determine religious or supernatural sources at all even if he admits to believing in them. And when he does make this leap of faith, he justifies it with the pragmatist method of judging any phenomena by its "fruits" even when its "roots" are inaccessible (26).

However, a significant part of James's argument, one that gets us closer to the rhetorical and hermeneutic implications of dynamic gifts, is that for there even to be the possibility of judging religion properly by its fruits, it is necessary to examine critically *a priori* conclusions against supernatural religious sources. The psychological hoops he jumps through to open up even the conditional possibility of religious sources in an extra-marginal field are meant to undermine dogmatic conclusions, scientific or theological, that preemptively close off incursions that can shift or expand our horizons of consciousness. In other words, to make *a priori* conclusions that there are no dynamic gifts is already to harden "the rind of the margin that resists incursions from beyond." This is basically what James argues in "The Will to Believe," the arguments of which influence all his subsequent work on religion and philosophy. This foundational

essay can be summed up as the justification of faith or the belief that some things are justified only by faith when there is insufficient evidence to act otherwise. There are times when we should act based on a non-logical faith even in the absence of convincing intellectual grounds because some facts can come about only as a result of an act of faith. One such fact, like love or justice,⁷⁶ is the reception of dynamic gifts. In the conclusion to *Varieties*, James cites this earlier essay to make this point about dynamic gifts:

Although the religious question is primarily a question of life, of living or not living in the higher union which opens itself to us as a gift, yet the spiritual excitement in which the gift appears a real one will often fail to be aroused in an individual until certain particular intellectual beliefs or ideas which, as we say, come home to him, are touched. These ideas will thus be essential to that individual's religion;—which is as much as to say that over-beliefs in various directions are absolutely indispensable, and that we should treat them with tenderness and tolerance so long as they are not intolerant themselves. As I have elsewhere written, the most interesting and valuable things about a man are usually his over-beliefs. (459-460)

This notion that ideas or beliefs condition the appearance of all phenomena including the gift is what I meant earlier by a hermeneutic anticipation.⁷⁷ Beliefs do not generate

⁷⁶ In "The Will to Believe," James gives several examples of social phenomena that depend on a kind of interpersonal faith in its existence: "A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted" (*Writings* 1992, 474). His favorite two examples are love relationships and ending train robberies.

⁷⁷ James uses two terms, intellectual beliefs (or ideas) and over-beliefs, which I read as synonyms. In an earlier passage, James defines an over-belief as the "buildings-out

the gift; but they provide a kind of subliminal suggestion that conditions its receptivity.⁷⁸

A better way perhaps to describe this is to say beliefs provide a hermeneutic center or horizon from which the religious experience of gifts can at least become a possibility. In this passage, we see how James's philosophy and psychology of gifts are both grounded on a hermeneutic theory. Beliefs can serve as hermeneutic frameworks to interpret, for example, some events as mere chance or acts of providence. Furthermore, beliefs condition not only the appearance, but also more importantly "the various directions" of gifts. Gifts, which are always mediated by language, can have different kinds of rhetorical effects depending on our interpretive frameworks. Beliefs say in greed or generosity, or in Buddhism or Marxism, condition dynamic gifts to empower us in different ways. Thus, while religious experience is *phenomenologically* prior to belief and theory, beliefs play an important *rhetorical* and *hermeneutical* function by conditioning the possibility and direction of various dynamic gifts. Between the phenomenological appearance of gifts and their rhetorical effects are hermeneutic frameworks open to sources beyond the self.⁷⁹

In this reading, experience and language are not opposed to each other, but mediated and conditioned by one another in a dynamic back and forth. It is true that

performed by the intellect into directions of which feeling originally supplied the hint" (388). The theology and tradition of each world religion for James is one such over-belief based on a primordial religious experience.

⁷⁸ See Proudfoot, "Pragmatism and 'an Unseen Order' in Varieties," where he argues that a historical naturalism instead of supernatural accounts can better inquire into the nature and causes of the subconscious.

⁷⁹ In a way similar to Gadamer's work and more recently to Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* and Mailloux's *Disciplinary Identities*, my reading of James highlights the connection among phenomenology, hermeneutics, and rhetoric. This should not altogether surprise us if we trace James's pivotal influence on the development of phenomenology via Husserl.

sometimes James makes a strong distinction between experience and language: “In short, you suspect that I am planning to defend feeling at the expense of reason, to rehabilitate the primitive and unreflective, and to dissuade you from the hope of any Theology worthy of the name. To a certain extent I have to admit that you guess rightly” (387). While James makes several statements like this throughout especially *Varieties*, they are misleading because they distract from how carefully James interweaves experience and language throughout much of the rest of the work:

We are thinking beings, and we cannot exclude the intellect from participating in any of our functions. Even in soliloquizing with ourselves, we construe our feelings intellectually. Both our personal ideals and our religious and mystical experiences must be interpreted congruously with the kind of scenery which our thinking mind inhabits. The philosophic climate of our time inevitably forces its own clothing on us. Moreover, we must exchange our feelings with one another, and in doing so we have to speak, and to use general and abstract verbal formulas. Conceptions and constructions are thus a necessary part of our religion [...] It would be strange if I disputed this, when these very lectures which I am giving are [...] a laborious attempt to extract from the privacies of religious experience some general facts which can be defined in formulas upon which everybody may agree. (389)

This passage clearly demonstrates James’s understanding that there can be no significant gap between experience and language, between feeling and reason. It is not only that every experience must be clothed, that is, interpreted or translated into a language that is neither private and arbitrary nor universal and fixed; but some

vocabularies or forms of reasoning also close off even the possibility of certain experiences that lie beyond one's horizons of consciousness. For language always already exists within a community of exchange that is rhetorically conditioned by the "philosophic climate of our time." Language not only articulates our experiences, but also conditions them. As we saw with Emerson, the line here between rhetoric and hermeneutics, between generating and mediating gifts is very fine indeed.

James draws the line by distinguishing between two modes of language that relate to experience differently, much like the distinction made at the beginning of this chapter between the rhetoric of gift economies and the rhetoric of polis economies. The first mode of language remains open to experience, in that "these intellectual operations presuppose immediate experiences as their subject-matter. They are interpretative and inductive operations, operations after the fact, consequent upon religious feeling, not coordinate with it, not independent of what it ascertains" (389). This mode of language, though contingent, is grounded upon religious feeling. Contrary to this first mode, the second mode of language "assumes to construct religious objects out of the resources of logical reason alone." It is this second kind of "intellectualism" that James says he wishes to discredit. Logical formulas, then, distancing themselves from all the subjectivity of experience and feeling, express "a disdain for merely possible or probable truth" (390).⁸⁰ They can be found in both scientific materialism and theological rationalism, whose objectives are to construct systems of absolute knowledge:

"Warranted systems have ever been the idols of aspiring souls. All-inclusive, yet

⁸⁰ Though James does not use explicitly the term rhetoric, the emphasis on probable truth (*doxa*) shows pragmatism's rhetorical leanings against dialectics' emphasis on absolute knowledge (*episteme*). For the relationship between pragmatism and the rhetorical tradition, see Mailloux's introduction to *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism*.

simple; noble, clean, luminous, stable, rigorous, true;—what more ideal refuge could there be than such a system would offer to spirits vexed by the muddiness and accidentality of the world of sensible things?” The remainder of the lecture is a response to this ironic question.

The problem with language grounded in logical formulas ultimately comes down to their lack of dynamic gifts. There is no power giving or given, no movement, exchange, or immediate interpretation of experience. James attempts to demonstrate this by rehearsing theological and philosophical arguments about the existence and attributes of God.⁸¹ The move James makes to discredit arguments about God’s existence is that “If you have a God already whom you believe in, these arguments confirm you. If you are atheistic, they fail to set you right” (392-393). These arguments are powerless, rhetorically so, in that they fail to persuade an atheist without a religious experience. The same is also true of arguments about God’s metaphysical and moral attributes. For James, none of these abstractions have converted or persuaded anyone because “the metaphysical monster which they offer to our worship is an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind” (401). What such formulations fail to understand is that “Conceptual processes can class facts, define them, interpret them; but they do not produce them, nor can they reproduce their individuality. There is always a *plus*, a *thisness*, which feeling alone can answer for” (408). The missing *plus* is

⁸¹ In a more recent Gifford lecture published as *With the Grain of the Universe*, Stanley Hauerwas criticizes James’s dismissal of these theological or metaphysical arguments. However, arguing that the metaphysical attributes of God do make a difference only confirms James’s pragmatist point that beliefs should make a difference.

something not generated by abstract reason alone, but contingent upon experiences more immediate and real to our consciousness.⁸²

The alternative is a mode of language grounded in hermeneutic experience. It differs from logical abstractions by acknowledging its “formulas are but approximations,” and though interpretation of feeling into words is necessary, it understands that “truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation” (409). Abstract concepts, mathematical proofs, and logical necessities, if they are detached from the truth and fact of experience, are powerless modes of language unable to make much pragmatic difference. Contrary to these, he suggests that a more contingent and hermeneutic mode of religious language is prayer, which he broadly defines as “every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine” (416). As “the very soul and essence of religion,”

Prayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion. It is prayer that distinguishes the religious phenomenon from such similar or neighboring phenomena as purely moral or aesthetic sentiment. Religion is nothing if it be not the vital act by which the entire mind seeks to save itself by clinging to the principle from which it draws its life [...] One sees from this why ‘natural religion,’ so-called, is not properly a religion. It cuts man off from prayer. It leaves him and God in mutual remoteness, with no intimate commerce, no interior dialogue, no

⁸² See chapter 3 “The Reality of the Unseen” for James’s argument that even mystical experiences, rooted in describable sensory feelings, are psychologically considered more real than abstract logical concepts: “I spoke of the convincingness of these feelings of reality, and I must dwell a moment longer on that point. They are as convincing to those who have them as any direct sensible experiences can be, and they are, as a rule, much more convincing than results established by mere logic ever are” (72).

interchange, no action of God in man, no return of man to God. At bottom this pretended religion is only a philosophy.

What natural religion essentially lacks is an intersubjective dialogue and commerce, or what he calls on the next page, “a sense that *something is transacting*” (417). In the concluding lecture, where James outlines the fundamental characteristics of religion, this something is clarified as “spiritual energy [that] flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world” by giving “a new zest which adds itself *like a gift to life*” (435, italics mine). In other words, in prayer there is an intersubjective transaction of dynamic gifts that results in pragmatic effects and can be phenomenologically traceable to experience. And this transaction is conditioned both hermeneutically in terms of an interpretive openness to dynamic gifts and rhetorically in terms of the way these gifts are directed.

Again, it must be emphasized that James is not deciding on whether the divine exists or not, though it is clear where he stands if he had to offer his own over-beliefs or what he admits seems more like a “sorry under-belief” (460). What this emphasis on prayer signifies for him is the attempt to open up a more dynamic transaction between experience and language, between sensory feelings, intellectual beliefs, and ultimately social action. Religion is not merely a subjective experience, but an experience embedded in an intersubjective transaction mediated by language. Thus, a pragmatist who prays is simply one whose mode of language is open to an experience of the other, to the reception of dynamic sources of power beyond the self. What matters for James is that certain modes of language either close or disclose the experience of dynamic

gifts that make action possible.⁸³ What kind of action we will see in just a moment. But interpretations of religious experience or transactions in prayer always result in real, historical and material changes. Without such evidence, James thinks it is a waste of time to discuss religion or anything else, since from a pragmatist's perspective the only way to judge the existence of any source is to trace the effects of its dynamic gifts. Therefore, when James says pragmatism widens the field of search for God, we can now better understand that whether religious sources really exist or not, a question whose answer can never be dogmatically certain for the pragmatist, their gifts do make a difference. *Every pragmatic action is the result of a dynamic transaction of gifts mediated by language.*

If we read *Pragmatism* and *Varieties* closely together as the last sentence suggests we do, it is possible to understand James's pragmatism as doing something more than simply mediating metaphysical disputes as he claims in the chapter "What Pragmatism Means."⁸⁴ *Pragmatism* begins by being open to opposing philosophical

⁸³ Since mysticism plays such a central role in James's study of religious experience, I suggest we extend his language of prayer to include the pneumatic phenomenon of speaking in tongues, which was a common trope in the nineteenth century. In addition to the personal accounts he included of this phenomenon, there is evidence in *Varieties* to suggest James was familiar with biblical references to *glossalalia*, where the gift of tongues is related to both the release of power (*dunamis*) and the gift of interpretation (*hermeneuo*). In this sense, the gift of tongues and its related gift of interpretation are useful metaphors for the transition from what I call pre-articulacy to the kind of articulation Charles Taylor argues is necessary to avoid a self-contradiction or fragmentation that results in "the price of self-mutilation" (see *Sources* pp. 53-107, 451-455). Taylor makes a distinction between a neo-Nietzschean ethic of inarticulacy and an articulacy without which we cannot access the means of grace to act on our ideals. By calling the phenomenon of praying in tongues as a form of pre-articulacy, I mean the never quite fully articulate process of translating experience into language. Babbling, in this sense, is always aimed at full articulation and its subsequent release of agency.

⁸⁴ Here is a relevant passage explaining pragmatism's mediating role: "Rationalism sticks to logic and the empyrean. Empiricism sticks to the external senses. Pragmatism

temperaments or habits of thinking, but by the end of his last lecture on “Pragmatism and Religion,” his philosophy in fact develops into its own “religious synthesis”:

But if you are neither tough nor tender in an extreme and radical sense, but mixed as most of us are, it may seem to you that *the type of pluralistic and moralistic religion that I have offered is as good a religious synthesis as you are likely to find*. Between the two extremes of crude naturalism on the one hand and transcendental absolutism on the other, you may find that what I take the liberty of calling *the pragmatistic or melioristic type of theism* is exactly what you require. (619, italics mine)

Here James’s pragmatism is more than a method and theory. It is a religious synthesis that puts forward a kind of pragmatic theism with substantive claims about the sources of human agency and history. James does not stop simply at the classic Peircean definition of pragmatism that “Beliefs are really rules for action” (506). What James fills in at this point is a particular belief that there are forces or powers, seemingly divine (or, it should always be added, potentially diabolic), that enable individuals to act in heroic ways to bring about historical changes. The kind of action James is ultimately interested in is the attempt to realize our highest ideals about the world and history. He calls these ideals our beliefs about the world’s salvation, which also implies the means of grace or dynamic gifts necessary to achieve them. The pragmatist is neither pessimistic nor

is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experience if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact—if that should seem a likely place to find him. Her only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience’s demands, nothing being omitted” (522).

optimistic, both of which he understands as deterministic views of the future.⁸⁵ Instead, James holds to a melioristic view, which “treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become” (612). If what James calls salvation becomes more probable, it will be the result of a mixture of complementary conditions and forces, which include for him an individual’s ideals, the cooperation of others, and the reception of dynamic gifts: “What now actually *are* the other forces which he trusts to co-operate with him, in a universe of such a [pluralistic] type? They are at least his fellow men, in the stage of being which our actual universe has reached. But are there not superhuman forces also, such as religious men of the pluralistic type we have been considering have always believed in?” (618). His answer is yes, only if we understand these forces or powers, whose sources might be untraceable yet known by their pragmatic effects, as “one helper, *primus inter pares*, in the midst of all the shapers of the great world’s fate.” No part, not even the gifts of God, absolutely conditions the whole. But dynamic gifts, whose appearance and direction are nevertheless contingent upon at least a hermeneutical contribution on our part, can have rhetorical effects on individuals and history for better or for worse. The varieties of religious experiences open up chances and gaps, themselves indeterminable gifts that

⁸⁵ James’s view on time deserves more attention than can be given here. In his *Principles of Psychology*, there is no category of the future in his chapter on time. The future is only an imagined projection of memory. This does not mean that the future is determined by the past, since novel combinations can open up new possibilities. Thus, another way to think about James’s notion of religion and dynamic gifts is that they are sources or gifts that empower imaginative projections into history. This notion would place James and Heidegger closer than either would perhaps be comfortable.

empower partial acts to save (or potentially to destroy) a world anything but guaranteed. This is ultimately James's faith and his religious pragmatism.

If beliefs are rules for action, James argues that the *belief* in dynamic gifts mediates their reception, which not only empowers individuals to act in ways that are otherwise difficult or impossible, but also introduces contingent forces that undermine deterministic views of history to open up melioristic possibilities. The emphasis on reception, especially from sources beyond naturally evolving forms of life, is important for James because it ultimately justifies the belief in that feeling of human freedom that is not fully explained in only naturalistic terms.⁸⁶ His belief in a dynamic transaction between the gifts of experience and language is integral to his pluralism, separating him, on the one hand, from the theological (and idealistic) monism of his father, and on the other, the evolutionary (and pessimistic) determinism of Herbert Spencer and Henry Adams.⁸⁷ These are significant distinctions that are worth emphasizing in the context of more recent criticisms by important figures such as Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor, who fault James for not being, in a sense, more like his father or like Spencer. That is, James is either too religious or not enough. By emphasizing further the rhetorical

⁸⁶ In the conclusion to *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892), James admits that determinism, which makes his study of psychology possible, can be claimed for scientific purposes. But he goes on to point out the limits of psychology: "When, then, we talk of 'psychology as a natural science,' we must not assume that that means a sort of psychology that stands at last on solid ground. It means just the reverse; it means a psychology particularly fragile, and into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint, a psychology all of whose elementary assumptions and data must be reconsidered in wider connections and translated into other terms" (*Writings* 1992, pp. 432-433).

⁸⁷ Both Richardson's biography and Menand's intellectual history are indispensable for reading James contextually. See the former's *William James* for an account of James's relation to Spencer and Adams. Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* offers an insightful account of James's relation to his father's work.

hermeneutic dimension of dynamic gifts, the next section defends James against these charges and attempts to situate him in a mediating role between Rorty and Taylor.

After all, though, you will say, Why such an ado about a matter concerning which, however we may theoretically differ, we all practically agree? In this age of toleration, no scientist will ever try actively to interfere with our religious faith, provided we enjoy it quietly with our friends and do not make a public nuisance of it in the market-place. But it is just on this matter of the market-place that I think the utility of such essays as mine may turn [...] Meanwhile the freest competition of the various faiths with one another, and their openest application to life by their several champions, are the most favorable conditions under which the survival of the fittest can proceed. They ought therefore not to lie hid each under its bushel, indulged-in quietly with friends. They ought to live in publicity, vying with each other.⁸⁸

Richard Rorty's contribution to the revival of twentieth-century pragmatism is a well-known story. Charles Taylor's relation to pragmatism is less remarked, but it is clearly there as well. For both philosophers James plays a key role in their arguments about religion and secularization. While Rorty thinks James ultimately betrays his own pragmatism by holding stubbornly to a religious "metaphysics of feeling," Taylor argues that James's work on religion is paradigmatic of contradictions in "our secular age." We might say their differing interpretations of James represent what one scholar has called

⁸⁸ From the preface to *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), in *Writings* (1992), p. 450.

two pragmatisms.⁸⁹ A close reading, however, that attends more to the rhetorical and hermeneutic dimension of James's religious pragmatism can not only offer important correctives to these divergent readings, but can also mediate the secular-religious divide as James himself so often tried to do. This can be done, as I have been arguing, by focusing on James's use of the religious language of gifts and power to develop a rhetorical hermeneutic understanding of dynamic gifts. Mediated by a particular mode of language, dynamic gifts open up in James's words "a new sphere of power" that enables individuals to do what is otherwise difficult or impossible.

I now want to show how this close reading of dynamic gifts might respond to Rorty's and Taylor's important critiques of James's religious pragmatism. My response will focus on two points about dynamic gifts that will be further developed here: rhetorically structured beliefs condition both the appearance and direction of dynamic gifts; and while the transaction of dynamic gifts originates in personal experience, it continues, as described in the passage above, in a kind of evolutionary public marketplace. Before developing these two points, let me begin by summarizing Rorty's and then Taylor's reading of James.

⁸⁹ Though Taylor does not appear opposite Rorty in Mounce's *The Two Pragmatisms*, I think the term is useful in this context. According to Mounce, the two pragmatisms are divided into realist (Peircean) and anti-realist (Rortian) strains. I do not suggest the substitution of Peirce with Taylor is without problems; Taylor is rarely considered a pragmatist. Yet I take the liberty to do so based on an article in which Taylor situates his views within his own distinction between two pragmatisms similar enough to Mounce's that is still applicable here (see Taylor "What is a Pragmatist?"). Books detailing Rorty's contribution to pragmatism's revival are many. The most relevant for my purposes are by three of his fellow pragmatists, who disagreed with him on matters religious. See West, *American Evasion* (1989); Gunn, "Religion and the Recent Revival of Pragmatism" (1999); and Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (2004).

In articles that parallel his “religious turn” from secular liberalism to what he calls romantic polytheism, Rorty revisited the James’s work.⁹⁰ Rorty’s characteristic argument is that there is a good James and a bad James. The good James, together with the good Nietzsche, is engaged in debunking “the traditional idea that we have a duty to bring our views into correspondence with a reality. I have focused on the willingness of both philosophers to say that the utility of a belief is the only judge of its truth” (“Some Inconsistencies” 89). This utilitarian definition of truth gives up the notion that there can be only one Truth, replacing it instead with a plurality of truths aimed not at correspondence but at diverse forms of human happiness. With roots in the Romantic notion that poetry can replace religion, Rorty says this pluralistic form of romantic utilitarianism can also be called a secular polytheism:

Here is a definition of “polytheism” that covers both Nietzsche and James. You are a polytheist if you think that there is no actual or possible object of knowledge that would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs [...] All you need do is to abandon the idea that we should try to find a way of making everything hang together, which will tell all human beings what to do with their lives, and tell all of them the same thing. Polytheism, in the sense I have defined it, is pretty much coextensive with romantic utilitarianism. For once one sees no way of ranking human needs other than playing them off against one another,

⁹⁰ On Rorty’s transition from secular liberalism to romantic polytheism, see Boffetti “How Richard Rorty Found Religion.” The three Rorty articles on James that I primarily rely on are “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibilities, and Romance”; “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism”; “Some Inconsistencies in James’s Varieties.”

human happiness becomes all that matters. (“Religion as a Conversation-Stopper” 23)⁹¹

In adopting this form of romantic polytheism, Rorty softens his earlier insistence that religion is a conversation stopper and ought therefore to be restricted entirely to the private sphere. After conceding that such a strong insistence ironically undermines liberal efforts to privatize religion, Rorty suggests that liberal democracies should instead work towards replacing traditional religions with newer ones.⁹² These newer religions still ought to remain private, but they need to be demythologized in such a way they do not interfere publically with naturalistic descriptions of the universe (“Religious Faith” 85-92).⁹³ When James sticks closely to this pragmatist version of romantic polytheism, he is being good. But James, says Rorty, is not always so good.

⁹¹ In adopting this form of romantic polytheism, Rorty is well underway toward softening his earlier insistence that religion is a conversation stopper and ought therefore to be restricted entirely to the private sphere. After conceding that such a strong insistence ironically undermines liberal efforts to privatize religion, Rorty suggests that liberal democracies should make a distinction between local parish congregations and what he calls “ecclesiastical organizations” that “devote themselves not to pastoral care but to promulgating orthodoxy and acquiring economic and political clout. We [secularists] think that it is mostly religion above the parish level that does the damage” (“Religion in the Public Square” 141).

⁹² See “Religion as a Conversation-Stopper.” For Rorty’s argument about replacing traditional religions and moralities with new ones, see “A Defense of Minimalist Liberalism.” More recently, after reading arguments by the neo-Calvinist Nicholas Wolterstorff and the religious pragmatist Jeffrey Stout, Rorty offered a reconsideration of his views on the public role of religion in “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.”

⁹³ Rorty points to the theology of Paul Tillich as an example of a demythologized religion. However, while Tillich certainly worked harder than anyone since Schleiermacher to translate theology in contemporary terms (specifically existentialism), Rorty stretches too far Tillich’s method of correlation or notion of religious symbols as a disregard for creeds and the promotion of theological “fuzziness” (“Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” 93-94). Perhaps Rorty is relying on Tillich’s *The Courage To Be*, which does intentionally blur the line between theology and existentialism, but a broader

The bad James can primarily be found in passages from *Varieties* and especially in its conclusion. There, Rorty says, James “betrays his own pragmatism” by being “for better or worse, more than just a pragmatist” (“Some Inconsistencies” 95-96). Rorty says it was for the worse because James was “torn between saying that we should adopt Arnold’s and Emerson’s quasi-theism because naturalism leads to despair and saying that we should do so on the basis of evidential experience” (91). The first remains pragmatic because it adopts a quasi-theism on a utilitarian basis of resisting despair. But the second betrays pragmatism because the evidential experience amounts to a “metaphysics of feeling” that posits the existence of God based on experiential content:

Had James carried through on his pragmatism, he would have simply let “religious” be a synonym for “vitally important to a person’s self-image” and let it go at that. He would not have tried to discriminate between “total reactions upon life” that are religious and those that are not. (89)

Rorty reads these two options as inconsistencies that keep James’s definition of religion “at the second of Dewey’s three stages of the development of religious consciousness [...] by retaining the notion of something nonhuman which is nevertheless on the side of human beings” (“Religious Faith” 96). In other words, James is stuck between traditional theism and a more consistent pragmatist “faith in the future possibilities of mortal humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community.” The principle symbol for Dewey’s pragmatic faith and Rorty’s own romantic polytheism is “the United States of America,” best expressed in a Whitmanesque civil

reading of the three volume *Systematic Theology* and especially *A History of Christian Thought* would show that the historical creeds are indispensable to Tillich.

religion “of openness to the possibility of as yet undreamt of, ever more, diverse, forms of human happiness” (“Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” 34).

Like Rorty, Charles Taylor has his own story of the good James, bad James, which fits in the larger narrative he has been telling about modern identities and conditions of belief.⁹⁴ Taylor’s good James is a key figure in the deconstruction of “the dominant epistemology that comes down to us in modern times from Descartes and Locke” (“What is a Pragmatist?” 73). The way pragmatism deconstructs this epistemological tradition is by reversing “a series of priority relations:

(1) Knowledge of the self and its states comes before the knowledge of external reality and of others. (2) Knowledge of reality as a neutral fact comes before our attributing to it various values and relevances. And, (3) knowledge of the things of “this world,” of the natural order, precedes any theoretical invocation of forces and realities transcendent to it. (74)

Although Taylor says not all pragmatists agree on reversing the last point, he argues that James does.⁹⁵ Other pragmatists who would rather hold onto (3) will find the notion

⁹⁴ The larger story, I refer to, is of course Taylor’s two influential books, *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*. Taylor’s reading of James appears in two texts: *Varieties of Religion Today* and “What is a Pragmatist?”

⁹⁵ In the article, Taylor states there is disagreement among pragmatists about the third point. But when one focuses on how pragmatism reverses the first two, the result suggests there might be what he calls a potential “broad church” definition of pragmatism that includes Heidegger, Mearleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein in addition to the principle American figures of “the last turn of the century” (75). This last qualification is important because while his description of pragmatism so far seems to agree much with Rorty’s, Taylor makes an important distinction about truth that would in Rorty’s mind exclude Taylor from this broad church. Although Taylor does not name names, I think it is safe to assume he has philosophers like Rorty in mind when he describes a “narrower, or perhaps one might say, more radical sense of pragmatism” that gives up entirely on any notion of truth as “getting it right” for a single notion of truth as “what works for us” (76).

of a transcendent reality highly problematic. However, Taylor argues, “once one overturns the first two priorities, the issue of the transcendent begins to appear in a different light”:

If there is no self-knowledge except through the other, the issue can arise whether this must exclusively be the human other. The work of Levinas, for instance, poses this question. And if we see meaning, relevance, as primordial in experience, the issue of what kinds of meaning are inescapable arises, and to what extent these might point to the transcendent. These are both mere questions; they don't yield their own answers. (81)

What Taylor likes is that James goes beyond treating these as mere questions to work out, as detailed in the previous section, a theory of religious experience and conversion that “is bound up with its being seen to be in more profound contact with reality [...] This is the source of the empowerment, and cannot be separated from this empowerment as a merely contingent cause [...] The whole account of the twice-born refers us to and grounds on an unreduced understanding of truth. If this is pragmatism,” Taylor concludes, “then count me in” (90-91).

However much this good James tempts Taylor to join a pragmatist “broad church” inclusive of transcendent realities, there is also a bad James who “has certain blind spots in his view of religion” that are “widespread in the modern world [...] just as operative in our age as in his” (*Varieties of Religion Today* 3). The blind spots have to do with James's emphasis on the individual and feeling as the real locus of religion. Taylor argues that James emphasizes individual feeling exclusively against religious communities and ideas or doctrines. The exclusion of the latter become “a striking

feature of the Western march toward secularity” (13), which he describes at length in the third chapter as a “post-Durkhemian dispensation of expressive individualism.”⁹⁶ In this dispensation, “Individuals make what they can of their ‘religious experience,’ without too much concern for how it all fits together at the level of society or how it affects the fate of different churches” (111). This side of James’s religious pragmatism, the bad one, is paradigmatic of our secular age. The result is a “fractured culture” that not only produces “what would earlier have been seen as untenable positions,” namely, Catholics who do not accept crucial dogmas, Christian Buddhists, or unbelievers who pray, but also fails to bind individuals to any significant social and political collaboration (106-107). Despite saying that this fractured culture tends to beget superficial spiritualities, Taylor stops short of nostalgic calls to return to earlier dispensations, distancing himself from “Some conservative souls [who] feel that it is sufficient to condemn this age” (113). Instead, Taylor concedes, “Even if we had a choice, I’m not sure we wouldn’t be wise to stick with the present dispensation” (114). His alternative, which I gather from his writings on multiculturalism, is for the kinds of liberal states that organize and maintain the cultural survival of multiple communities defined around thick descriptions of the good life, including religious ones.⁹⁷

What is interesting about Rorty’s and Taylor’s readings is how very similar they in fact are. Not only do they agree with James’s anti-Cartesian emphasis, but they also agree on two other key points: James recovers transcendent sources and he privatizes

⁹⁶ Here is a definition of what Taylor means by a post-Durkheimian dispensation: “The spiritual as such is no longer intrinsically related to society” (102).

⁹⁷ For Taylor’s multiculturalism, see his influential essay, “The Politics of Recognition.” For an important critique of his multiculturalism that has influenced my approach to this topic, see Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*.

religion. And it is precisely on these two points that they stand on opposite sides of James. Rorty wishes James went further in privatizing and demythologizing theology into a more pluralistic civil religion of liberal democracy. Taylor thinks he went too far. However, if read in these ways, James can come to represent too simplistically the other side. Either he is too religious or not enough. As a result, Rorty and Taylor miss important distinctions on these two points that can be made with a more careful reading.

The first point is that they collapse James's talk of *God* or *supernatural sources* with *determinant effects* in what I have been calling a rhetorical hermeneutics of dynamic gifts. True, James is guilty of some inconsistencies as Rorty rightly points out. But it is too big a jump to draw from these occasional inconsistencies a conclusion like Rorty's that the twenty lectures of *Varieties* do not add anything to the twenty pages of "The Will to Believe" ("Some Inconsistencies" 96). A more charitable reading would say that James meant to distinguish between dynamic gifts, which can be phenomenologically verified, and supernatural sources, which cannot be scientifically confirmed but nevertheless stated as an over-belief. If we allow this kind of distinction, then both Rorty and Taylor assume too much when they suggest James's rhetoric of dynamic gifts is also necessarily a phenomenology of God. In my reading, James is not something other than or more than a pragmatist, as Rorty claims. He is a religious pragmatist that points to observable evidence of spiritual gifts and powers on the one hand, and on the other, translates talk about sources into talk about open and contingent possibilities. This reading would also resist Taylor's conclusion that dynamic gifts bring us into contact with a transcendent reality or ground us on an unreduced understanding of truth. Because the pragmatist cannot yet determine with absolute

certainty whether the source of dynamic gifts is theological or physiological, James stops just short of an “unreduced” truth.

These are not insignificant distinctions to be made because they get at the second and more profound misunderstanding that James is trying to privatize religion. As we saw in the previous section, different beliefs condition the various directions of dynamic gifts, which affect one’s conduct in relation to others: “every difference must *make* a difference, every theoretical difference somewhere issue in a practical difference” (398). And once gifts enter the practical realm of what James variously calls transactions, commerce, or market-places, they ought to vie with one another to see which are fit to survive. Rorty ultimately dismisses James’s over-beliefs because they distinguish between religious and natural sources of power. Had James demythologized his definition of religion further, says Rorty, he would have seen all forms of power as the same individual or private pursuit of happiness. As long as one’s idiosyncratic will to power does not impinge on another’s, there is no way to evaluate them according to Rorty. Taylor sees it the opposite way. James is paradigmatic of the modern expressive individualism, which privatizes religion so much we can no longer articulate our beliefs, and therefore, our horizons no longer have the depth or reach to access the kinds of dynamic gifts necessary to sustain and empower us toward our highest ideals.

But here on this point, both Rorty and Taylor get James wrong. James does not believe that all gifts are equal or that they ought to remain private. In the previous section, we saw how particular beliefs condition the direction of dynamic gifts. Depending on our beliefs or what we determine to be the center of our hermeneutic horizon, dynamic gifts can have different rhetorical effects to empower different actions.

What we believe about them can condition how they affect us. For James, there just might be a difference in the long run between gifts conditioned by natural or supernatural sources, by Christian or Hindu scriptures, or by scientific or literary theories. These are not merely the private pursuits of personal happiness. Can they be privatized? Sure, and James describes in *Varieties* a number of mystics for whom their beliefs are private. But he clearly demonstrates a lack of patience with their idea of religion as a seemingly “endless amatory flirtation.”⁹⁸ Instead, what James is really interested in is not Rorty’s private will to happiness, but as he says in *Pragmatism*, the willingness “to be damned for God’s glory,” which is to say, the willingness to sacrifice personal happiness for a greater ideal (617). The only way to know the truth of a particular gift directed by or at a specific over-belief is to trace not its source, but its survival out in the public, vying with others in the market-place, as James calls it in the epigraph to this section. The following is the missing passage in that epigraph:

If religious hypotheses about the universe be in order at all, then the active faiths of individuals in them, freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out. The truest scientific hypothesis is that which, as we say, “works” best; and it can be no otherwise with religious hypotheses.

⁹⁸ The quotation is referring to the writings of St. Theresa of Avila. Taylor interprets this criticism as James’s “trouble getting his mind around [...] Catholicism” (*Varieties of Religion Today* 23). What Taylor misreads, however, is that James’s issue is not with the saint’s denominational background, but with what seems to be the endless private preoccupation in mysticism. What is ironic is that Taylor accuses James of the very thing that James himself criticizes. For a stronger argument about James’s Protestant bias, see Hollinger’s “Damned for God’s Glory.”

Religious history proves that one hypothesis after another has worked ill, has crumbled at contact with a widening knowledge of the world, and has lapsed from the minds of men. Some articles of faith, however, have maintained themselves through every vicissitude, and possess even more vitality to-day than ever before. (*Writings* 1992, 450)

Subjecting religious hypotheses or over-beliefs to experimental tests ought to replace the metaphysical preoccupation of philosophies of religion. These tests constitute what James calls in the same passage above the “science of religions,” but in my opinion is better called a *hermeneutics of religions*, which highlights the overlapping pragmatist and rhetorical emphasis on the probable (*doxa*) instead of the absolute (*episteme*). This is basically the same thing as what James says in *Pragmatism* of his theory of truth: “If there be any life that it is really better we should lead, and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would be really *better for us* to believe in that idea, *unless, indeed, belief in it incidentally clashed with other greater vital beliefs*” (520). While religious experiences are personal, they are never private because they always take place within, to borrow Taylor’s phrase again, “webs of interlocution.” These webs include for James not only the over-beliefs that mediate and condition dynamic gifts, but also the experiments of history that provide the only test to determine the “truth” of a gift, whose sources may be within us or not but always beyond our rational control. James’s rhetorical hermeneutics of dynamic gifts in *Varieties* ultimately leads him to believe that there have been enough experiments in history that point not necessarily to the existence of God, but decisively to the melioristic and pluralistic possibilities of a world still in need of pragmatists who pray.

As certain objects naturally awaken love, anger, or cupidity, so certain ideas naturally awaken the energies of loyalty, courage, endurance, or devotion. When these ideas are effective in an individual's life, their effect is often very great indeed. They may transfigure it, unlocking innumerable powers which, but for the idea, would never have come into play. 'Fatherland,' 'The Union,' 'Holy Church,' the 'Monroe Doctrine,' 'Truth,' 'Science,' 'Liberty,' Garibaldi's phrase 'Rome or Death,' etc., are so many examples of energy-releasing abstract ideas. The social nature of all such phrases is an essential factor of their dynamic power.⁹⁹

My objective has been to consider the interconnected rhetorical and religious dimensions of James's work on pragmatism. What we find is that both reflect his preoccupation with power, effects, and action. James defines religion as the experience of new spheres of power. And pragmatism is defined as a philosophy that turns away from abstract reasoning and instead turns toward action and power. One of the central questions that frame James's work is what releases or inhibits various manifestations of power. And the answer to this question is particular modes of rhetoric that can close or disclose the experience of dynamic gifts. Abstract verbal formulations such as metaphysical arguments about the existence of God cut us off from the experience of religious power. But modes of rhetoric such as prayer provide hermeneutic possibilities that can open us up to sources of power beyond our rational control. What this shows is

⁹⁹ From "The Energies of Men" (1906), printed in *Writings: 1902-1910*, pp. 1236-1237.

the central role language plays in mediating between experience and action. Ideas and beliefs, each rhetorically structured as means of persuasion and interpretation, can be used in what Mifsud calls “a spirit of domination” (“Rhetoric as Gift/Giving” 100). Or they can be used more creatively in a dialogical openness to and cooperation with the other. Rhetoric then becomes less a tool to win the argument and more a gift that releases creative energy. Rhetoric as a medium of “gift/giving” becomes, to use James’s term, transactional between the experience of power and its dynamic effects on action.

A couple weeks after completing his *Pragmatism* lectures, James gave a talk to the American Philosophical Association titled, “The Energies of Men.” Robert Richardson tells us it was a talk reworked from an earlier address given to the psychology club at Harvard delivered before the lectures. “Thus the work in pragmatism,” according to Richardson, “was bracketed—or contained, so to speak—by James’s inquiry into ‘the *amount of energy available* for running one’s mental and moral operations by’” (*William James* 489). In this essay James argues that one “great dynamogenic agent” is “energy-releasing” ideas such as those included in the passage above that begins this section: “Ideas contradict other ideas and keep us from believing them. An idea that thus negates a first idea may itself in turn be negated by a third idea, and the first idea may thus regain its natural influence over our belief and determine our behavior. Our philosophic and religious development proceeds thus by credulities, negations, and the negating of negations” (*Writings* 1987 [1907], 1236-7). As in his earlier writings on religion, James calls this process of negating negations a conversion: “*Conversions*, whether they be political, scientific, philosophic, or religious, form another way in which bound energies are let loose. They unify, and put a stop to ancient mental

interferences. The result is freedom, and often a great enlargement of power” (1237-8). What this confirms is the notion that ideas can become means of persuasion that release dynamic sources of power. Most individuals, James claims, operate on levels far below their maximum capacity of energy. If we’re able to tap into greater reservoirs of power, both in ourselves and others, rhetoric will play a crucial role in negating those ideas that alienate us from an openness to and experience of dynamic gifts.

Mifsud asks whether we can imagine rhetoric as a gift figured not in terms of obligation and return, but in terms of squander and release. I think James provides one answer in writing about dynamic gifts that empower us rather than place us under debt. If dynamic gifts, at least religious ones, come from sources that cannot be determined for the pragmatist, then to whom are we indebted especially when all we can say about those sources are that they come from experience? Thus rhetoric as gift can avoid the burden of obligation if it opens itself up to what Gadamer calls the infinite multiplicity of experience or what James liked to call the pluriverse. James is not the first to think of such gifts. He is part of an American tradition that goes back at least to Emerson who also writes about a more democratized notion of gifts that give us more fully to ourselves rather than back to the giver. The subject of dynamogenics, according to Robert Richardson, “is the long-standing American interest in awakening to new life and new power, the great theme of Thoreau and Emerson and Whitman, the great theme too of Jonathan Edwards, now carried to the new American century by William James” (*William James* 489). What is true of all these figures is that modes of rhetoric (e.g. sermons, lectures, essays, poetry, etc.) play a significant role in whether or not we have access to dynamic sources of power that come to us like spiritual gifts. And while

figures like Emerson and James inherit this language of dynamic gifts from the awakenings and revivals, they also attempt to purge the gift from its cycles of obligation, indebtedness, and resentment. Whether they or we are successful depends in large part on how dynamic gifts are described and how those descriptions affect our behavior. If this is true, then rhetoric and hermeneutics do play a central pragmatic role in what kinds of gifts we experience and how they determine social transactions.

CHAPTER 4

“Are Not These Gifts Worth the Giving?”

Religious Pragmatists on Gratitude

Indeed, by taking a less philosophical and more broadly intellectual and cultural approach to the evolution of American pragmatism, one can readily discern its inflections with the religious in the writing of a long line of American thinkers from Emerson and Thoreau to Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop.

– Giles Gunn (“Religion and the Revival of Pragmatism” 407-8)

The battle for the soul of American democracy is, in large part, a battle for the soul of American Christianity, because the dominant forms of Christian fundamentalism are a threat to the tolerance and openness necessary for sustaining any democracy.

– Cornel West (*Democracy Matters* 146)

It is true that the expression of religious premises sometimes leads to discursive impasse in political debate. But there are many important issues that cannot be resolved solely on the basis of arguments from commonly held principles. So if we are going to address those issues meaningfully, we had better find a way to work around the impasses when they arise. One name for the way I propose is conversation.

– Jeffrey Stout (*Democracy and Tradition* 10)

These are events of universal truth making, events like the founding of our nation and its call for a universal democratic subject and, for some of us, events like that embraced by one apostle of the Word and his call for a universal believing subject. Answering such calls acknowledges difference but commits to a truth addressed to all, a universality that is not found in the past but will be made in the future through the very acts of understanding required to accomplish its hearing.

– Steven Mailloux (*Disciplinary Identities* 121)

In my previous chapters, I attempted to lay out a critical and constructive theory of gifts.

I began in the first chapter with Charles Taylor’s question about modern substitutes for theological grace as the means of empowerment for various ends. What are the

sources of power, agency, and inspiration that drive and sustain us? Whether we conceive them to be theological or natural, they are, as we have seen for Emerson and James, sources beyond the self that come to us like the experience or reception of gifts. What they call gifts, mediated by certain modes of language, can open up sources of dynamic power akin to more pneumatological theologies of the Spirit and grace. Dynamic gifts, as I have been calling them, are sources of empowerment. Crucial to the phenomenological appearance of such dynamic gifts (chapter 2) as well as their pragmatic effects (chapter 3) is the role of language, defined broadly as not only the means of communication and expression, but also more fundamentally the condition of all experience, belief, and action. Thus, I have also been focusing on the rhetorical and hermeneutical dimension to what I am calling a charismological study of gifts. Like Poirier's notion of the superfluous and the vague or Gadamer's theory of truth or art, gifts are always mediated by language, apart from which they are difficult to distinguish from mere commodities.

Discerning the difference between gifts and their economic value has been for the most part the primary task of recent theories of the gift developed in the social sciences as well as philosophy and theology. A brief rehearsal of a few representative figures will reinforce again how I have intended to intervene in this conversation. In modern theoretical discussions of the gift, the starting point is Mauss's classic anthropological study *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. One reason why this has become the foundational text is that in contrast to Enlightenment ideals of a unilateral, disinterested notion of benevolence, Mauss helped to recover the circular and mutually interested exchange of gifts. In his recent book,

Gratitude: An Intellectual History, Peter Leithart suggests, “For some post-Kantian European intellectuals, *The Gift* revealed the astonishing news that there is no free gift, that all gifts are ‘contaminated’ by returns of gratitude” (12).¹⁰⁰ Mary Douglas goes one step further in the forward to the 1990 translation of *The Gift* and states that Mauss’s conclusion was not simply that there is no free gift, but that “there should not be any free gifts” (vii). With gifts come obligations that create bonds of reciprocity necessary to form the basis of communal exchange. In Mauss’s words, “To refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality” (13).

This idea that gifts are bound up with obligations of communal exchange led Derrida to question whether we can still call these objects of exchange gifts at all. If it is true that gifts can become oppressive when they demand too much in return or when they are expected without anything in return, Derrida argues that there is a fundamental contradiction to the notion of free gifts. Thus, according to Derrida, Mauss’s study “speaks of everything but the gift: It deals with economy, exchange, contract (*do ut des*), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift *and* countergift—in short, everything that in the thing itself impels the gift *and* the annulment of the gift” (*Given Time* 24). Only by maintaining the line that separates gift from economy, can we be alert, critically and ethically vigilant, he says, to the traps and ruse of the circle of debt, obligation, and resentment. Nevertheless, Derrida insists that a pure unilateral gift is impossible because it cannot appear without disappearing immediately into the logic and circle of

¹⁰⁰ Leithart goes on to say, “For others, Mauss’ book seemed to offer an alternative to the self-interest of modern capitalist economies.” One might say that Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift* illustrates an example of this second response drawing on Mauss to discern the workings of a “gift economy” of artists alongside a “market economy.”

economy. This is not to say there is no gift as such. We can still think the gift or more precisely the “impossibility of the gift,” which crucially is not for him a negative concept. The gift is not merely an illusion. Instead, the impossibility of the gift is what we hope for. Indeed, it is the very condition of hope, a dynamic power that in a sense draws us toward that which cannot appear and therefore cannot be returned. Even those like Jean-Luc Marion who disagrees about the impossibility of the gift’s appearance build on Derrida’s ideal of a pure and linear gift outside the circle of debt.¹⁰¹

An Anglican theologian and one of the founders of the Radical Orthodox movement, John Milbank takes issue with Derrida’s (and Marion’s) gift, which in a sense gives no-thing and therefore does not obligate anything in return. While Derrida says there is no gift in economy, Milbank argues there is no gift apart from it. Milbank reinstates Mauss’s circle but does so by transcending anthropology and theologizing the gift-economy as inherent to the inner Trinitarian exchange. God himself is part of a dynamic community, not some disinterested and detached giver. Creation as God’s gift constitutes a relation, not simply a reciprocity and, as a result, makes possible our participation with one another in a divine economy. As long as the return is delayed and not identical to the gift received, Milbank thinks gifts, especially theological ones such as

¹⁰¹ A Catholic philosopher and theologian, Marion disagrees with Derrida’s impossibility of the gift by essentially reversing its temporality. Rather than saying we hope for a gift not yet, Marion argues it has always already been. In the form of what he calls “saturated phenomenon,” Marion extends the phenomenological horizon beyond objectness (Husserl) and beingness (Heidegger), indeed, beyond the gift itself to a horizon of givenness (*Gegebenheit*) that makes it possible for all other objects and beings to show up at all. The gift, by reducing it phenomenologically before it slides into economy, can reveal a more fundamental—and ultimately theological—horizon that exceeds and saturates our intentionality. Gifts reverse the Cartesian cogito to reveal that all phenomena in varying degrees are not constituted by us. See *Being Given* for his most developed articulation of his project on givenness.

charity or love, can and “must be purged of the competitive, agonistic, and honor-driven features that characterized gifts in ancient and tribal societies” (Leithart, 215-6). In other words, the gift is the condition for community, which after having been decimated by both capitalist self-interest and modern notions of a disinterested subject, as Milbank believes, must be reclaimed by a more “radical orthodoxy” that can infuse modes of exchange with a greater sense of mutual obligation and generosity through the gift.¹⁰²

My contribution to this far-reaching debate has been a modest but, I hope, not insignificant one. On the one hand, Derrida demonstrates the dynamic power of gifts while purging them from their ironic consequences of obligation, debt, and resentment, but he maintains their phenomenal impossibility. On the other hand, Milbank insists that gifts can infuse economy with more generosity, but he cannot imagine communal exchange apart from obligations. Both are equally concerned about mitigating the ill-effects of market capitalism: Derrida by deconstructing the way gifts are masked and inscribed in economy; Milbank by returning to a concept of exchange rooted in a divine economy of grace. Derrida hopes for the pure gift; Milbank, for a pure community. While being attentive to these important differences, my objective has been to engage these arguments dialectically and mediate them dynamically to offer an alternative position about gifts that appear without resulting in debt. This position can be located if we shift the horizon from exchange (give and take) to empowerment (dynamic flow).¹⁰³

¹⁰² Across many articles Milbank develops his theology of the gift. Two of his most extended and direct statements can be found in “Can a Gift Be Given?” and *Being Reconciled*.

¹⁰³ While it is convenient to describe this distinction as one between economy and gift, there is a broader sense in which both horizons of exchange and empowerment are economic. In the history of theology, the term economy (e.g. divine economy) has been used in at least three ways: exchange, distribution, and emanation. Derrida addresses

Accompanying this hermeneutical revision is also a rhetorical turn toward a language rooted more in the mystical or pneumatological tradition of emanation, incarnation, and spiritual gifts.

In the context of nineteenth-century American culture, I have argued that such a mediating language can be found in the writings of Emerson and James, which constitute in Poirier's view a broad conception of a literary pragmatism. Emerson's rhetoric of gifts attempts to open up sources of dynamic power from an infinite prospective of being (e.g. history, nature, the divine) that gives us more fully to ourselves rather than contradict our self-reliance with a sense of indebtedness. What Emerson calls experience and which I have described as the reception of dynamic gifts opens up finite form to sources of infinite power beyond the individual self. Human beings with their rhetorical capacity as language-makers (e.g. poet, prophet) are, as he calls them, "a golden impossibility" charged to mediate the excesses of power and form without collapsing them together. By maintaining the "hair's breadth" between power and form, experience and language, history and agency, Emerson points to a dynamic giving that cannot quite be measured analytically by economic loss and gain. James extends this theory about how dynamic gifts appear from sources beyond the self—or at least the rational conscious self—particularly through what he calls the experience of religious conversions, to argue how beliefs or interpretive frameworks condition the direction of dynamic gifts. James's hermeneutics of religious experience shifts a

primarily economy as exchange, and Milbank focuses on a certain concept of distribution. What I am calling a horizon of empowerment draws on a way of defining economy as emanation, as a giving without loss. As I argued in chapter 1, among theorists, I see this concept most at work in Gadamer and in a less rhetorical, more phenomenological mode in Marion.

metaphysics of God into the pragmatic effects of gifts. The existence of God cannot be determined rationally, but a belief in one or another religious source may just make a difference in the long run if it empowers us toward melioristic possibilities that otherwise might not be realized. Both Emerson and James describe in the language of gifts certain experiences of sources beyond the self that result in the flow of a dynamic power that mediates the infinite and finite without collapsing them together.

This contribution to an interdisciplinary discourse on the gift has been the first aim of my dissertation. Instead of trying to apply theories of the gift anachronistically back to writers of the nineteenth century, I offered a close rhetorical reading of the language of gifts found in Emerson and James so that we might begin to ask how their understanding might complicate more recent gift-theories. The historical context that nourished such theories is the way theologies of divine grace and spirit were changing in response to the awakenings and revivals. Not only were Presbyterians embroiled in polemics about the nature and function of divine grace that led to their split in 1838, but the so-called Second Unitarian Controversy was also about whether the gifts of divine revelation should be received, as Emerson put it, first- or second-hand (Ahlstrom). Much of their debates centered on just how corrupt human nature is and, therefore, how dependent it is upon divine and ecclesiastical sources beyond the self. As Paul Tillich has argued in his *History of Christian Thought*, underlying the Romantic reaction against such debates was a pneumatological understanding of the Spirit as a “dynamic power of the infinite which [not only] transcends every finite form” but also breaks into it (372-378). I am arguing that Emerson and James played a significant role in opening up such pneumatological thinking about divine grace and spiritual gifts. Dynamic gifts mediate

between infinite power and finite form without collapsing them together. Although my principle aim has not been historical, one might say this dissertation falls under a broad history of pneumatology as it developed in the awakenings and revivals from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. Charismology (the study of gifts) is, after all, a species of pneumatology (the study of the Spirit), which according to some recent theologians is “the last unexplored theological frontier” and according to others closely related to the work of modern philosophers from Hegel to Derrida and Milbank.¹⁰⁴ What I have been calling the rhetoric of gifts in Emerson and James registers some of these historical changes and can help us reframe or expand our religious histories to include a pneumatological perspective that can complicate some of our current debates about religion and secularization.¹⁰⁵

This last point leads to the second aim of my dissertation. It is to contribute to the interdisciplinary study of literature and religion, which has gained some attention in recent decades as a result of the so-called “religious turn.” While there may be renewed scholarly work in this field, it is far from clear, as we will soon see, what it is or where it is going.¹⁰⁶ The focus of this chapter will be to offer one approach to the study of religion

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Karkkainen, *Pneumatology*, p. 13. In addition to Karkkainen’s work, see Work’s chapter “Pneumatology” and Welker’s contribution to *The Work of the Spirit* for broad histories of modern pneumatology.

¹⁰⁵ Even after consulting with other scholars of pneumatology, I have yet to find anything like a history of pneumatologies in the United States. However, in addition to Perry Miller and Sydney Ahlstrom, both of whom highlight the importance of the mystical elements of American religious history, I have relied on Holifield’s *Theology in America* and Noll’s *America’s God*.

¹⁰⁶ Wesley Kort argues that the study of religion and literature does not currently constitute anything like a “field” or “specialty” because “it has failed to achieve academic location” (106). At best, at least in the US, it can be called instead an “interest.” Although there seem to be stronger advocates in England, where it goes by the name of its most visible journal *Literature and Theology*, Kort suggests there too its future as an

in American literature by developing a pragmatist definition of gratitude as a proper response to dynamic gifts. As a pragmatist, my principle motivation has been to read Emerson as a mediating figure between Derrida and Milbank and to read James between Rorty and Taylor. By doing so, I am intentionally trying to undercut attempts to generalize pragmatism as simply a secularizing force in American culture that is antagonistic to religion. Not only is this untrue when we carefully examine the founding figures that include Emerson and James, but recent scholars including the ones quoted in epigraphs to this chapter also demonstrate how religion remains an important pragmatist concern. Of course, this is not to say that all pragmatists should be religious or even that they ought to make religion an object of study. But to suggest that pragmatism favors the secular replacement of religion with literature, as Richard Rorty and Roger Lundin have each suggested from opposing sides of the religion and literature debate, is in my view unfair to those who have demonstrated that these two disciplines are not necessarily antagonistic toward each other and indeed are mutually enriching.

Drawing on Jeffrey Stout's definition of gratitude as a democratized form of religious piety, the remainder of this chapter will offer a pragmatist approach to the study of religion, especially in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Sui Sin Far, and Frank Norris. At stake in these readings is whether or not we will be able to move beyond a certain impasse between what I will call secular pragmatism and religious traditionalism. In order to grasp the significance of

established field is precarious at best despite efforts at the University of Glasgow and the recent publication of *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* (2007).

this particular debate about secularization, I will begin the next section with a brief sketch of the interdisciplinary study of literature and religion. Understanding the current state of this field will highlight the consequences of my reading of dynamic gifts and how a more democratized notion of piety as gratitude can enable us to acknowledge the complex spiritual and secular dimensions of American literature without exaggerating claims about the eclipse of religion and, if true, the necessity of an aggressive return.

When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion.

–Stanley Fish

The story of literature and religion as an interdisciplinary field of study can be told on several levels: institutional, methodological, and ideological. To summarize briefly these narratives, I will be relying primarily on what has become in recent years a kind of handbook to the field. In the summer of 2009, *Religion and Literature* (Notre Dame), one of the three main journals along with *Christianity and Literature* (Pepperdine) and *Literature and Theology* (Oxford),¹⁰⁷ published a special volume that invited some thirty-four scholars to respond to the following prompt: “[W]hat does the phrase ‘religion and literature’ denote? May religion and literature be constituted as a field, and if so, how?

¹⁰⁷ The three journals worked together to organize its first joint conference in 2009 on “The Hospitable Text: New Approaches to Religion and Literature.” Keynote speakers included Rowan Williams, Julia Lupton, and John Schad. See <http://www.hospitabletext.org/> for more information.

What is, or should be, or could be the relationship of studies in this area to other areas of literary, theological, and/or religious inquiry?” Although the responses vary widely depending on the particular religion, culture, and historical period, many scholars tell a similar story about the disciplinary paths taken by “religion and literature” in the US.

While offering commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of each, Susan Felch gives some insight into three major institutional paths the field has taken. The first was the establishment in 1950 of a graduate program in Theology and Literature at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School.¹⁰⁸ With Paul Tillich’s theology of culture as the initial impetus to the program, “scholars have continued to examine the ‘cultural condition’ of human beings, explored parallels in artistic and religious imaginations, and developed new understandings of aesthetics and ethics” (99). Along with work done in similar programs located in other divinity schools and religious studies departments, critics examined the ways specific religious content can clarify and answer questions raised by literary texts.¹⁰⁹ At its worst, literature to the detriment of its own methods of study becomes nothing more than a site where theology (and, as is often the case, philosophy) is done. At its best, Felch says, “It cultivates religious memory so as to enable students and scholars to hear and explicate theological resonances in literary texts as well as literary qualities of religious texts” (103-4). According to Wesley Kort,

¹⁰⁸ Still in existence at the Divinity School in Chicago, but now called Religion and Literature, the program falls under the general area of study called Religion and the Human Sciences, which include other programs in the History of Religions and the Anthropology and Sociology of Religion.

¹⁰⁹ Other well-known programs, concentrations, or initiatives exist at Yale Divinity School, Harvard Divinity School, Duke Divinity School, and in religion departments at Claremont Graduate University, Boston University, and the University of Virginia. Notable exceptions are programs in English departments at the University of Notre Dame, Baylor University, and Washington University in Saint Louis.

these graduate programs mostly in faculties of religion or theology underwent significant change as a result of the so-called “linguistic turn,” after which they “became associated largely with non-conventional theological and religious interests, and this occasioned some resistance to them from both literary and theological quarters” (107). While those associated with these programs met annually at the “Arts, Literature, and Religion” section of the American Academy of Religion, Kort says they have largely failed to make “a unifying and solidifying academic enterprise” such that he does not believe “conditions have emerged in this country to warrant the continuation of graduate programs in ‘Religion and Literature’” (110). While support at the level of recognizable graduate programs is waning, Kort argues the study of religion and literature can nevertheless flourish through two other institutional means that Felch goes on to describe.

The second development coalesced in 1956 when a group of college English teachers organized the Conference on Christianity and Literature (CCL), which still meets annually in regional locations. Along with its journal, *Christianity and Literature*, Felch says the “CCL has consistently sought to cultivate and encourage academics who are self-consciously confessing Christians” (99). While it does not presuppose any particular theological orientation, scholars share “both a focus on ‘how literature engages Christian thought, experience, and practice’ and a commitment to ‘an orthodox understanding of Christianity as a historically defined faith.’” Its weakness becomes evident when its engagements of religious content in literature “degenerate either into predictable or into forced readings, so that, for instance, every character with outstretched arms becomes a Christ figure” (103). However, its strengths also come

from “criticism that explicitly draw on the living intellectual, ethical, and liturgical traditions of the Christian church” in such a way that resists thin caricatures and reductions of historical religions (102). What such criticism reveals is the diversity of perspectives, many of which may even contradict each other, that nevertheless fall under a broadly defined Christian orthodoxy that includes a great variety of denominational ecumenicism.

The third institution Felch mentions is the current MLA division on Literature and Religion, which was originally called Religious Approaches to Literature before its name change in 1997. The division first began in 1976 in conjunction with members of the CCL and equally interested Catholic scholars, who were inspired by the work of Jacques Maritain and began in the following year publishing the *Notre Dame English Journal: A Journal of Religion in Literature*. This journal was the predecessor to the current *Religion and Literature*.¹¹⁰ The MLA division’s name itself signaled, however, a shift in emphasis. Unlike the graduate programs and the CCL, “the MLA division foregrounds literary texts and relegates Christianity to one among many world religions” (99). This can sometimes result in thin descriptions of religions and fail to recognize the complexities of and even opposing practices within particular faith traditions, but it also, “in its best moments, vigorously interrogates the domains mapped out by contested terms—religious, spiritual, sacred, the divine, imagination, fundamentalism, the numinous, post-secular—as these appear in or intersect with literary texts” (101-2).

¹¹⁰ Kort makes the point that the journals *Christianity and Literature* and *Religion and Literature* are divided along Protestant and Catholic lines. While perhaps somewhat reflective of the universities to which they are attached—Pepperdine and Notre Dame—I think it is worth noting that the editor of *C&L* is Catholic and many of the advisory board members for *R&L* are non-Catholics, so that such differences which may have been historically true are diminishing.

In mapping out some of the strengths and weaknesses of each institutional approach to the study of religion and literature, Felch suggests they need each other if such a field is to continue. As the title of her article indicates, her intent is to point out both “Cautionary Tales and Crisscrossing Paths.” What is unhelpful, she says, is the rhetoric of a turn to religion, which “carries with it a whiff of ennui, as well as the suspicion that it may be motivated, at least in part, by a search for novelty and exoticism that can only be short-lived” (100). Her concern is that the reliance of such rhetoric to bolster the field “is to risk notoriety and its inevitable sequel—dismissal.” I tend not to be so down on the rhetoric of a religious turn, especially as it calls for renewed attention to global religious phenomena and pressures even if these were always in fact there. But I can agree with Felch when she writes, “we can and ought to insist not simply that religion and literature are ancient allies but also that, because they traverse the same landscapes of human souls, societies, and cultures, they necessarily interpenetrate, overlap, and overlay one another.”

While Felch implicitly deals with some of the methodological approaches to these “same landscapes,” others prioritize such developments in their historical accounts of the field. An early example is Giles Gunn’s *The Interpretation of Otherness* published in 1979. Described in J. Hillis Miller’s review as “an authoritative historical sketch” (299), Gunn’s chapter on “The Religious Use and Abuse of Literature: Notes toward a Short History” divides the field into three relatively distinct phases: (1) the pastoral or dogmatic orientation in the twenties and thirties that evaluated literature by the standards of a prior religious, either conservative or liberal, ideology; (2) the apologetic or correlative method advanced primarily by Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich in the early forties to

mid-sixties, which examines how theology addresses and resolves the moral and existential problems raised in literature; and since the mid-sixties (3) the critical or hermeneutical turn that not only undermined fixed theological (Neo-Orthodoxy) and literary (New Criticism) dogmas, but also broke down disciplinary boundaries that separated what was once a broader conception of the *bonnes lettres*. While some more recent historical accounts emphasize the antagonistic relationship between the two, Gunn argues that both literature and religion can be seen as falling under the more general discipline of cultural studies.

While he does describe distinct phases when theologians failed to take literary methods seriously and when literary theorists undermined religious dogmas, Gunn goes on to show how the methodologies of each discipline can help critically examine assumptions not simply to undermine the other, but work together to mediate our experience of “otherness,” which he describes as “a sense of things not quite our own” (120). This experience of the other—which he points out has its own historical development in the nineteenth century from transcendental to social encounters with otherness—comes from a disjunction between the self and what lies beyond, both of which come from what Gunn calls “the substance of culture” (6). Religion and literature are mediated forms of this substance. But because culture can never fully be transparent, the world as described by religion or literature is never completely identical with it. What the study of religion and literature together allows us to do is examine how each separately constitutes and reflects our experience of culture: “The desired goal, whether successfully achieved or tragically frustrated, is deliverance and new life, and the method is always some form of *decreation*, a sloughing off of the old ways in

response to the encounter with something astonishingly new” (191). What Gunn calls decreation includes both deconstructive *and* reconstructive possibilities. It is both deliverance and new life. An encounter with the astonishingly new moves us to slough off the old. And it is very similar to what I have been calling a critical and constructive theory of dynamic gifts that empower us from sources beyond the self. Although at this point Gunn had yet to develop fully his pragmatist approach to cultural criticism, we can discern already in this notion of decreation a pragmatist methodology that sees the relationship between literature and religion in non-agonistic terms.

Thirty years after Gunn’s history, perhaps indicating an increasing polarization of religious and secular voices, Darren Middleton argues that the methodological history of religion and literature can be roughly divided into two phases in the decades following T. S. Eliot’s influential essay “Religion and Literature” (1935). The first he calls apologetic or confessional, which was popularized from the early 1950s to the late 1970s. Although “multi-faceted” he insists, this approach basically begins with Christian theology as the foundation from which literary texts were read, analyzed, and evaluated, and it is marked “by an eagerness to use literary art to illustrate specific dimensions of Christian doctrine” (151). The problem with this approach is what Middleton calls “theology *before* reading” and it often results in “evacuat[ing] fiction of its fictionality.” Perhaps in reaction to this first phase, the second spans from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, characterized by the onset of postmodernism. Middleton describes the rise of methodologies such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and critical theory that helped “theologians and religionists, who might otherwise succumb to the tempting belief that they possess the Final Truth, to relativize their pronouncements.” While one

methodological approach was more prevalent in each phase, current scholarship in the field, he says, tends to fall for the most part into either the confessional or the postmodern camp.

In dividing the current state of religion and literature along this dichotomy, Middleton leaves out an important contribution by Gunn. The really significant difference is not that Middleton describes only two phases as opposed to Gunn's three. Instead, what drops out of Middleton's account completely is Gunn's contribution that literature and religion are two different but not unrelated modes of mediating the same substance of culture. By situating culture as a common source of religion and literature, what Gunn avoids is the kind of antagonistic relationship between them as described by Middleton. In fact, with the exception of three out of the thirty-four scholars who contributed to this special edition of *Religion and Literature*, Gunn's work has been by and large forgotten or ignored.¹¹¹ This is unfortunate not only because *The Interpretation of Otherness* was once considered an authoritative historical account of the field, but also because it seems to indicate a widening gap between what Middleton calls the confessional and the postmodern. Middleton himself seems to construct the dichotomy between these two methodologies in order to suggest a third way toward more globalized studies of religion and literature. But as he acknowledges, many scholars today tend to fall into one camp only to look askance at the other.

¹¹¹ The three exceptions are Bouchard's "Religion and Literature: Four Theses and More," Mizruchi's "Loose Canons and Representative Works in Religion and Literature," and Ziolkowski's "Forum on Religion and Literature: A Mildly Polemical Position Statement." All three cite Gunn specifically for his argument about literature and religion both drawing from the common source of culture.

If they do, they are likely to justify their suspicions with a more ideological history of the relationship between literature and religion that has continued to persist. This particular narrative is founded on a familiar story about secularization, about how literature comes to replace theology after having been devastated first by the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and later in the nineteenth century by Darwinism and higher biblical criticism. Matthew Arnold's formulation of this narrative is usually the one cited, but those who want to emphasize the process of secularization in the US need only to remind us that Arnold read Emerson, who along with William James (the two principle figures in this dissertation) is responsible for setting the conditions that gave rise to the kind of anti-religious liberal secularism championed for many years by Richard Rorty.

Although a philosopher by training, Rorty ended his career in a comparative literature department, which he hoped would avoid the kind of "Platonisms" or "knowingness" that he deemed had snuffed out the older progressive activist impulses in sociology and philosophy departments. In contrast, Rorty called "for a religion of literature, in which works of the secular imagination replace Scripture as the principal source of inspiration and hope for each new generation" (*Achieving Our Country* 136). As discussed in chapter 3, Rorty revised eventually some of his stronger anti-religious claims about keeping religion out of the public sphere. But even in adopting what he called a "romantic polytheism" that sought to undermine not religion as such but "anticlericalism," he maintained without any change the secularization narrative found in his earlier works *Consequences of Pragmatism* and in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. The persistence of this narrative can be strikingly seen in one of Rorty's last

publications, the afterword to the one hundredth anniversary edition of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* written by his maternal grandfather and Social Gospel giant, Walter Rauschenbusch. Rorty wrote the following conclusion in his characteristically sweeping narrative style: “One can imagine a twentieth century in which the two World Wars and the Great Depression were avoided, the Bolshevik Revolution collapsed, and social democrats like Eugene Debs and Jean Jaures were elected to high office,” a century in which “Decolonization and the entrance of India and China on the international stage could [...] have taken place against the background of a consensus, in the West, that building a global egalitarian society was a moral obligation” (349). Rorty writes all this could have happened if a Social Gospel Christianity, rather than Marxism, inspired radical socio-political change. “With a bit more luck,” Rorty continues, his grandfather’s “dream could have come true [...] But our luck was bad, and Christianity has probably missed its chance. The likelihood that religion will play a significant role in the struggle for justice seems smaller now than at any time since *Christianity and the Social Crisis* was published.” Although less inimical in tone, the historical point is clear. No amount of nostalgia can renew religion for progressive politics.

While Rorty relies on the secularization narrative to push us further in that direction, others have told the same story for the purpose of trying to militate against this course and instead renew religious traditionalism.¹¹² Roger Lundin has argued that

¹¹² Since 2002 with support from the Erasmus Institute and the Evangelical Scholarship Institute, literary critics and theologians from a broad range of perspectives formed the American Literature and Religion Seminar held at Notre Dame. They have since collaborated to publish two volumes: *There Before Us: Religion, Literature, and Culture from Emerson to Wendell Berry* (2007) and *Invisible Conversations: Religion in the Literature of America* (2009). Led by Roger Lundin (Wheaton), participants included Lawrence Buell (Harvard), Andrew Delbanco (Columbia), Denis Donoghue (NYU),

the shift in cultural authority away from Christian orthodoxy to the antifoundational postmodernism of a Rorty or Stanley Fish can be traced back to Emerson and James (*From Nature to Experience*). Instead of these secular pragmatists, Lundin encourages us to examine our culture through the perspective of the neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth and the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Denis Donoghue also has Emerson in mind when he writes “that modern American literature is a substitute for religion, but a substitute in which the original has been absorbed” (“Finding a Prose for God” 23). The antidote he suggests at the end of his essay is membership in “the Church, the sacraments, the rituals, the Mass, Confession, and Communion” (37). From the Anabaptist perspective, Ralph Wood and Stanley Hauerwas more or less agree. As the title of their joint essay suggests, it is precisely this idea that Christianity has been absorbed into a privatized liberal civil religion that explains “How the Church Became Invisible.” To combat this invisibility, Hauerwas in an earlier work that contributed to his rise in theological prominence, calls for the Church to recover its witness—in contrast to the right-wing Moral Majority—to stand over against the state and never in line with it by being “resident aliens” who constitute a separate “Christian colony” (*Resident Aliens*).

These ideological uses of the secularization thesis explain why it continues to persist. It remains useful. Whether to encourage further secularization or to recover a lost traditionalism, it offers a narrative context that tells us how far we have to go or how

Stanley Hauerwas (Duke Divinity), Elisa New (Harvard), Mark Noll (Notre Dame), Barbara Packer (UCLA), Ralph Wood (Baylor), and others. Not all of these are religious traditionalists, of course, but the seminar has been a key avenue through which traditionalists are entering debates about American literature.

far we have drifted.¹¹³ Rorty and Hauerwas, neither of whom are professional literary critics, are nevertheless the most visible figures who have represented opposing sides of the religion and literature spectrum. According to Jeffrey Stout in *Democracy and Tradition*, they are partly, if not largely, responsible for a certain impasse between what he calls liberal secularism and the new traditionalism. Stout has attempted to resolve this impasse because he believes Rortians and Hauerwasians have a great deal of political work to do together but are too divided between them. In a moment, I will have more to say about the kind of political work Stout imagines and what all this has to do with gifts. But in 2003, his attempt to engage these opposing sides paid off. To discuss Stout's book, Rorty, Hauerwas, and Cornel West all came together at what has become an infamous panel in recent years at the American Academy of Religion. Chastising both Rorty and Hauerwas for their provocative rhetoric, Stout asks each to think about the enormous influence they have had on law schools and higher education, as well as on seminaries and divinity schools:

I worry about the resentment of public life that I sense in Hauerwas's younger followers. I see Hauerwas's relentless attack on Niebuhr and Rauchschenbusch as partly responsible for the almost total disintegration of the

¹¹³ For an important recent volume that complicates the secularization thesis, see Calhoun, et. al., *Rethinking Secularism*. For two recent works of criticism in American literature, see Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption* (2007) and Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief* (2010). Fessenden argues that rather than indicating the loss of religion's hegemony, secularization masks the way specifically Protestantism remains dominant even if it is less conspicuous. Hungerford focuses on twentieth-century US literature to show how the modern fragmentation of belief indicates not the loss of religion but what she calls "the conditions for transcendence": "What one observer might see as the gap in a person's logic, then, I see as a whole world of belief, belief in the nonsemantic powers of language. This is a world where religion and literature collaborate" (xix, xx).

religious left. The black church is just about all that's left of the religious left. Why is that? Because few people who actually live in black neighborhoods are tempted to *behave politically* as if justice were a bad idea.

I also worry about the Nietzschean narcissism that I sense in many of Rorty's younger readers, most of whom find his love of Whitman and Dewey quaint, or naïve, or despicable. I see his claim that secularists are inherently better citizens than theists as partly responsible for alienating the Hauerwasians. (Springs 435)

In response to Stout's comments, Rorty acknowledged that despite disagreements, he and Hauerwas can be "fully compatible with agreement on what matters in practical politics" (443). The "elephant in the room" that may just bring them together, Rorty suggested, "is Christian fundamentalism as a backup for the right wing of American politics." (A major reason why Hauerwas critiques liberalism is its detrimental influence on Christian complicity with state power, which he calls Constantianism.) And in perhaps the closest statement that suggested he and pragmatists might find some common ground, Hauerwas said, "if you read Barth with Wittgensteinian eyes, you can see him performing a Jamesian act." After he himself admitted that this "may seem quite extraordinary" to those who have followed his work, Hauerwas went on to acknowledge some of his more polemical statements may have been excessive.

I came to these debates at a formative moment in my intellectual development. But because of my own eclectic background, I have often found myself not so much in between these two groups as dialectically drawing on them both in different ways. An important resource for me came from the work of pragmatists such as Stout, West,

Gunn, and Mailloux, who helped me to see that pragmatism was first and foremost about getting things done and that it need not necessarily contradict my own particular religious persuasion as stated in the first chapter.¹¹⁴ In attempting to tie all this back to the field of American literature and religion, I would like to suggest that these figures constitute a position beyond secular pragmatism and religious traditionalism, which more or less correspond to the postmodern and confessional camps that Middleton described earlier. In contrast, we might call their position a kind of *religious pragmatism*, whose goal is not to convert one side to the other, but to nuance our accounts of religion enough to find common ground to work politically together. For each of these religious pragmatists, nineteenth-century American writers have played an especially significant role because the writings of Emerson and James, among others, have always been contentious sites of interpretation in terms of how religion figures in their work. But for secularists like Rorty, these writers represent hope for what will be the eventual triumph of secular literature over religious theism, while they are evidence for traditionalists like Hauerwas of the Church's slide toward greater invisibility as it is co-opted by the state. If we take seriously Cornel West's claim that "The battle for the soul of American democracy is, in large part, a battle for the soul of American Christianity" (e.g. against fundamentalism), then much may be at stake in how we interpret these nineteenth-century writers. Despite Stanley Fish's argument that there is no logical connection between theory (or meta-interpretation) and practice, I agree with Mailloux

¹¹⁴ At the AAR discussion, Stout argues that a pragmatist theism need not necessarily be a contradiction (Springs 439-440). West is a Baptist; Mailloux is Catholic; and Gunn is Jewish. Stout himself, however, is not a theist but considers himself what Stanley Cavell has called an Emersonian perfectionist. See note 108 for an explanation of how Stout sees this as a kind of religious naturalism.

who demonstrates how there can still be rhetorical, and therefore political, implications to our general beliefs and interpretations.¹¹⁵ If this is true, then how religious pragmatists read figures like Emerson and James is key to moving beyond not just a theoretical impasse, but ultimately also a political one between secular pragmatists and religious traditionalists. Let me turn back to Stout's argument in *Democracy and Tradition* first to develop a pragmatist notion of gratitude as a proper response to dynamic gifts and second to show how this attempt to locate a common political ground is related to the study of American literature and religion.

Surgeons are not praised for the depth of their rage against disease but for their contribution to a patient's survival and well-being. We want their incisions to be wisely chosen and supple in execution, not as deep as can be. Leaving the patient intact is a minimal criterion of success. Yet we stupidly prize the wrong kinds of depth in our critics, forgetting that a democratic critic, who serves the people as a whole, should leave the people whole at the end of the day. Even the line between the friends and foes of democracy cannot be drawn too violently without defeating its purpose.

(Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* 59-60)

In arguing with Rorty and Hauerwas about how to read figures like Emerson or James, Stout states his political agenda as being nothing less than to revive the religious left, broadly defined to include both theists and non-theists in the tradition of

¹¹⁵ See chapter 5 of *Disciplinary Identities*, pp. 101-123.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. It is a constituency that has been thinned out over the last several decades in part as a result of competing claims between liberal secularism and religious traditionalism. Stout's central concern is the state of democracy in the US and the question of what, if anything, can bind us together as citizens to meet the challenges of elitism, militarism, and consumerism that are undermining our democratic ideals and institutions. Only with a broad coalition of both secular and religious people will we have the mass support, Stout argues, to address some of the challenges he believes are currently detrimental to democracy.

But religious traditionalists have been busy arguing that modern democracies are themselves to blame for the widespread spiritual emptiness and moral fragmentation. Seen as a leveling force that undercuts traditions and communities, democratic liberalism fails to cultivate the virtues and ethical character necessary to sustain the common good, whose definition cannot even be agreed upon.¹¹⁶ This question of character, for traditionalists, is then fundamentally tied to education and politics. As Stout sees it, secular liberals have often reinforced this traditionalist critique by insisting on a social contract theory that defines the state as a neutral entity, bracketing out competing claims of traditions that only result in political deadlock and incoherence. Since religion in the end is a "conversation stopper" (Rorty), it ought then to be set aside behind a "veil of ignorance" to reach an "overlapping consensus" (Rawls).¹¹⁷

Traditionalists, however, claim that to bracket out religious reasoning from public life

¹¹⁶ See Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

¹¹⁷ See Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*; Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper." After reading Nicholas Wolterstorff's and Stout's critiques, Rorty revised his stance on the role of religion in public political reasoning. For this revision, see Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." For two strong non-religious critiques of Rorty, see Connolly, "Mirror of American" and Lentricchia, "Rorty's Cultural Conversation."

amounts to an act of impiety by disconnecting society from the sources of family, history, and God.

The question of piety here is the key. As Stout defines it, piety “is not to be understood primarily as a *feeling*, expressed in acts of devotion, but rather as a *virtue*, a morally excellent aspect of character. It consists in just or appropriate response to the sources of one’s existence and progress through life” (20). And he argues it is central to the debate over literature, religion, and politics.¹¹⁸ To what extent should our response to these sources play a role in a democracy? While liberals want to limit piety to the personal and private, traditionalists insist on public acknowledgment and proper deference to them. And though traditionalists claim that democracy is the root of the problem, Stout argues that it need not be. In fact, democracy itself according to Stout is a tradition with a range of voices that should not be defined solely by liberal secularists. Emersonians like Walt Whitman, Ralph Ellison, and others constitute an alternative strand of what Stout calls a “democratic traditionalism” that also insists piety is an important *public* virtue. While secularists disagree with religious traditionalists about “how the sources should be conceived and what constitutes appropriate acknowledgement of our dependence on them” (20), piety is a necessary virtue that enables one to “summon the spiritual wherewithal, the moral fiber, to act on behalf of democracy before democracy itself gives way” (23). Emersonian pragmatists differ from religious traditionalists in that piety is conceived not as deference toward hierarchical powers that define the object and method of devotion. Instead, the responsibility of

¹¹⁸ Stout argues that Emersonians inherited this idea from Romantic poets in general, and more specifically, by democratizing Edmund Burke’s “conception of piety that came to them by way of Wordsworth” (34).

defining a proper response lies within *our poetic powers of description*. Thus, the role of our moral and poetic imagination remains open rather than fixed so that gratitude, not loyalty or deference, becomes the expression of piety. Gratitude here, like dynamic gifts, does not result in indebtedness. Whether we conceive these sources to be theological or natural, we can acknowledge our gratitude to the sources of existence and progress through life in a way that empowers us to be more fully ourselves.¹¹⁹

I will come back later to Stout's notion of poetic powers to describe a religious pragmatist approach to the study of literature and religion. For now I want to examine how a theory of gifts underlies his argument. What Stout calls the sources of existence and progress through life is what I have been calling dynamic gifts. From a pragmatist perspective, these sources and the gifts that come from them can be conceived naturally or theologically. Either way, they constitute our very existence and the means for empowerment. They provide us, as Stout says, the "spiritual wherewithal, the moral fiber, to act." They are sources of dynamic power from beyond the self. What Stout calls gratitude as the expression of democratic piety is similar to my reconfiguration of the gift by shifting its rhetorical association away from indebtedness and toward empowerment instead. And the purpose for this shift is to locate a common rhetorical space for liberals who worry about the gift's liabilities and for traditionalists who worry about losing its

¹¹⁹ Stout who is a non-theist nevertheless holds to a pragmatist notion of "religious naturalism" rooted in the work of George Santayana. Beth Eddy's *Rites of Identity*, written under the direction of Stout at Princeton, extends Santayana's notion of religious naturalism to show how democratic piety also appears in the works of Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke. Here is her definition of religious naturalism and its connection to democratic piety: "George Santayana, a religious naturalist who in *Reason in Religion* had given an account of religion as part of a life of reason that relied on no powers other than those naturally available to human beings, treated piety as a natural human disposition that might include, but was not limited to, the understandings of piety offered by religious traditions" (28).

possibilities. For Stout this “grateful but life-affirming spirit” can be found in Emerson who “was able to receive—and acknowledge dependence on—gifts that could not be fully reciprocated. He knows full well that he is indebted, beyond all capacity to repay, to the sources of his existence and progress through life, but his is a piety cleansed of sadomasochist tendencies by democratic self-respect. He is ready to receive gifts joyously, to acknowledge them justly, without maceration of body or soul” (39). In Stout’s reading of Emerson’s “Experience,” we can see how hard Stout is working through the tension between obligation and Emersonian self-reliance in order to mediate the concerns of both liberals and traditionalists. And yet we can also see just how entrenched the rhetoric of indebtedness is in our concept of gifts by seeing its residue in this passage. Some of this ambiguity can be resolved, as I suggested in chapter 2, if we read Emerson’s “Experience” alongside “Gifts” to see how gifts can mediate a dynamic flow rather than simply indicate an object exchanged.

But there is another sense in which this ambiguity reflects a deeper concern that gifts should not be entirely disconnected from at least one obligation, that is, to express gratitude. How free should the gift be before its dynamic power becomes inaccessible? This deeper concern of traditionalists has to do with whether the expression of gratitude itself might be the very means to access sources of dynamic gifts. They are constitutive of each other. I think we hear something like this, for example, in the Gettysburg Address, where Lincoln asks how best to respond to “those who here gave their lives.” In Stout’s terms, he expresses a democratic piety for these ultimate gifts of sacrifice, acknowledging the sources of the nation’s existence and progress. The speech is about the question of dedication. On the one hand, it is “altogether fitting and proper” to

dedicate the ground as “a final resting place.” On the other hand, “in a larger sense,” he says, they cannot dedicate the ground if it is meant simply as a reciprocal gesture:

The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract [...] It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

What is given results not just in “increased devotion” (empowerment), but also an “unfinished work” (obligation). A dedication of the ground would be a poor response if intended as a form of exchange or repayment. Instead, the acknowledgment of gratitude is precisely what opens up sources of dynamic empowerment to continue “the great task remaining before us.” Lincoln clearly tries to steer the gift away from exchange, but he suggests that its dynamic power to inspire further action is rooted in at least one obligation to express gratitude by dedicating ourselves to an unfinished task. Even if we untie it from all other obligations, Lincoln insists that gratitude must remain a constitutive part of the gift. More precisely, according to a democratic notion of piety, gratitude can become a necessary precondition to release the power of dynamic gifts. It is what we bring to mediate the gift’s reception. It is a kind of posture or mood that conditions the experience of gifts.

This notion that gratitude is a constitutive component of gifts takes on another important dimension in some of the late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century writings of Sui Sin Far and W. E. B. Du Bois. I want to touch briefly on their rhetoric of gifts and gratitude to illustrate two other examples of democratic piety.¹²⁰ Whereas Lincoln says the proper expression of gratitude is to dedicate the self to the nation's freedom and democracy, Far and Du Bois ask us to consider what the nation owes its racial minorities.¹²¹ I think Du Bois in the end draws, more than Far does, from Emerson and James to purge gratitude from the language of indebtedness. Far is also concerned about both democratizing gratitude and yet retaining some of its claim to motivate us to action. But she remains more ambivalent about the way gifts and gratitude are tied to indebtedness.

On the one hand, many of Far's stories depict acts of "ingratitude," whereby individuals are able to escape from traditional social and cultural expectations to choose their own lives for better or worse.¹²² In her most well-known story, "Mrs. Spring Fragrance," Far satirizes the way gratitude can often mask injustice when the title

¹²⁰ Sui Sin Far and Du Bois were not the first to think of racial contributions as gifts. In an 1867 lecture in the Parker Fraternity Course, "Composite Nation," Douglass writes, "The theory that each race of men has some special faculty, some peculiar gift or quality of mind or heart, needed to the perfection and happiness of the whole is a broad and beneficent theory, and, besides its beneficence, has, in its support, the voice of experience" (25). Douglass expands Emerson's notion that each individual has a gift that must be cultivated and given to the world to an idea that every race too has its gifts. The purpose of Douglass's speech is to defend the cause of the Chinese in the US, arguing that America will only be strengthened by a diversity of racial gifts.

¹²¹ Stout draws parallels between debates on democratic piety today and debates on black nationalism in the mid-twentieth century. In chapter 2 of *Democracy and Tradition* called "Race and Nation in Baldwin and Ellison," Stout argues that the questions of religion, tradition, and democracy are also fundamental to questions of race.

¹²² For an interesting discussion about the role of ingratitude in gift-theories, see Leithart's *Gratitude*, where he argues that Christians were accused of "ingratitude" for not properly participating in Roman modes of gift-exchange.

character writes her husband about a “most exhilarating” lecture called “America, the Protector of China!”:

[A]nd the effect of so much expression of benevolence leads me to beg of you to forget to remember that the barber charges you one dollar for a shave while he humbly submits to the American man a bill of fifteen cents. And murmur no more because your honored elder brother, on a visit to this country, is detained under the roof-tree of this great Government instead of under your own humble roof. Console him with the reflection that he is protected under the wing of the Eagle, the Emblem of Liberty. (21)

Against this satirical backdrop, Far depicts a comedy that ensues from the conflict between duty (e.g. gratitude) and love (e.g. liberty). The young Laura is in love with Kai Tzu, but her parents have arranged her marriage to Man You, the son of the Illustrious Teacher. Mrs. Spring Fragrance, who is more Americanized than others, helps to make Western love prevail by introducing Man You to the young Ah Oi, whom he has decided to marry despite “the displeasure of his parents” (20). By the end of the story even Mr. Spring Fragrance softens his traditional understanding of love and learns to express his happiness in a way his wife thinks results from his reading her American poetry books.

But the conflict between duty and love, as is more often the case, does not always end so happily. In “The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese” and its sequel “Her Chinese Husband,” Minnie refuses her ex-husband, James Carson, to marry instead Liu Kanghi to whom she is “indebted” for his generosity of saving her and her son. Minnie is caught between two sources of her gratitude. She chooses Kanghi, but the racial ties remain and she is constantly reminded of her transgression:

“though belonging to him as his wife, yet in a sense I was not his, but of the dominant race, which claimed, even while it professed to despise me” (81). At the end, some of the Chinese who also see the marriage as a betrayal shoot Kanghi dead. Nevertheless, by going against their racial obligation to remain each in their separate groups, Minnie confesses that Kanghi “was for several years a very happy man” (83) and that for her the “happiness of the man who loves me is more to me than the approval or disapproval of those who in my dark days left me to die like a dog” (77). Though tragic, or more accurately *through* tragedy, Far often depicts such individuals heroically as representative figures who rebel against traditional expectations of racial piety and choose instead liberal ideals of freedom and democracy.

Stories like these that go against narrow obligations to tradition might suggest that Sui Sin Far had no room for gratitude as an important concept of democratic virtue. On the other hand, however, she relies quite often on a rhetoric of gratitude precisely to remind people of the Chinese sources of their existence and progress through life. In “A Plea for the Chinaman” (1896), Far deplors laws that exclude the Chinese in the US and impose unfair taxes in British Columbia. After responding to unjust charges about Chinese cheap labor and inherent criminality, Far ends her article with a question about gratitude: “Will [the government] forget the debt of gratitude America and British America owes to China—China, who sent her men to work for us when other labor was not obtainable?” (198). Here again we see the notion of a *debt* of gratitude that Emerson and James tried to move beyond. But the appeal for gratitude in this passage suggests that justice can be motivated by other means besides a liberal rhetoric of equality. Indeed, the notion of equality, fundamental to capitalist competition, may in fact

more often be the source of inequities since no one's interest is obligated to anyone else's. Gratitude, however, binds people together in solidarity (not submission) by acknowledging their dependence on gifts not their own. According to this, shall we say, hermeneutics of gratitude, I should treat the Chinese fairly because my very existence and progress depends on their gifts. Far insists in other articles that the Chinese give gifts not with the calculated expectation of return, but "gives for the sake of giving [...]" for he receives more than his money's worth of pleasure in believing that he is giving pleasure" (252). However, the expectation of Chinese gifts without the requisite condition of fairness amounts to a different kind of ingratitude that results not in greater freedom but greater injustice. Without gratitude, gifts appear no differently from commodities that can be exploited.

By intentionally blurring the boundary between gift and labor, between gratitude and justice, Far is trying to navigate a path beyond traditionalism and liberalism. On the one hand, gratitude should remind us to look *back* and acknowledge our sources. On the other hand, it should also call us to move *forward* toward greater democracy and justice. I see this tension in Far the same as I do in Lincoln and, as we will see, in Du Bois. They are all at various stages of working out how we might access dynamic gifts to motivate us without contradicting our democratic ideals. Perhaps nowhere better does Far chart out a path for gratitude as democratic piety than in her short memoir, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian." There she offers a beautifully nuanced account of both the strengths and weaknesses of the racial divide that runs down even her family and indeed her own soul: "Fundamentally, I muse, all people are the same. My mother's race is as prejudiced as my father's" (223). Even when she ends

with the liberal notion that “Individuality is more than nationality,” she justifies it with the traditional Confucian saying, “You are you and I am I.” And yet, despite this appeal to individuality, she nevertheless extends her hands to both the liberal West and the traditional East in what I see as a gesture of gratitude without which the gift is destroyed: “I give my right hand to the Occidentals and my left to the Orientals, hoping that between them they will not utterly destroy the insignificant ‘connecting link’” (230). Or perhaps it is a gesture of her giving her gifts, which are recognizable if there is an expression of gratitude. And indeed she finds one in a newspaper one day: “The Chinese in America owe an everlasting debt of gratitude to Sui Sin Far for the bold stand she has taken in their defense” (223). An everlasting debt remains, as Far sees it, but such obligations cannot but abandon all hopes for satisfaction.

Because of the influence of Emerson and James, Du Bois goes further than Far to develop a noneconomic understanding of gifts and gratitude and how it can relate to racial justice.¹²³ Dynamic gifts and democratic gratitude are important underlying themes in *The Souls of Black Folk*, one of whose primary objectives as he states at the conclusion of the first chapter is to discern how whites and blacks “may give to each those characteristics both so sadly lack” (16). All the characteristics he goes on to list in the following sentences such as a pure human spirit, folklore, and faith are what he calls in other parts of the book gifts. African Americans are, as he famously wrote in his description of double consciousness, “gifted with second-sight in this American world” (10). Du Bois reminds us again and again that gifts given and received by African

¹²³ Several scholars have made the connection between Du Bois and pragmatism. The two most significant arguments have been made by West (*American Evasion*) and Posnock (“Going Astray, Going Forward”). For a more recent account, see Taylor, “What’s the Use of Calling Du Bois a Pragmatist?”

Americans cannot be reduced to their economic value. One example is the gift of education Du Bois describes in the chapter “Of the Training of Black Men”:

This was the gift of New England to the freed Negro: not alms, but a friend; not cash, but character. It was not and is not money these seething millions want, but love and sympathy, the pulse of hearts beating with red blood;—a gift which to-day only their own kindred and race can bring to the masses, but which once saintly souls brought to their favored children in the crusade of the sixties, that finest thing in American history, and one of the few things untainted by sordid greed and cheap vainglory. (69)

In addition to citing the inscription on a memorial to the founder of Atlanta University that begins, “In grateful memory,” Du Bois acknowledges in other chapters gratitude for dynamic sources that continue to empower African Americans. His chapter on Alexander Crummell is an exercise of democratic piety to inspire another generation of activists. The following chapter, “Of the Coming of John,” demonstrates the folly of assuming leadership over a people without taking proper account of their pieties. But more significant than any of these other gifts and expressions of gratitude is what Du Bois calls “the greatest gift of the Negro people” (155).

More clearly than Emerson’s infinite prospective of being and James’s new sphere of power, Du Bois offers a concrete example of a dynamic gift in his description of the sorrow songs or spirituals. Not only are they sources of “rare beauty,” but when they are sung, they also have the ability to stir “men with a mighty power” (155). However, what makes them the greatest gift is not simply their aesthetic or inspirational value. The historical development of the spirituals as a gift represents the kind of mutual

giving between blacks and whites without resulting in indebtedness. Du Bois tells us the first stage of the musical influence was African and the second, Afro-American. Then in the third stage “is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian. One might go further and find a fourth step in this development, where the songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody” (158). In addition to these racial sources of the gift, Du Bois goes on to state that the spirituals are also constituted by sources both religious (lyrics) and secular (melodies). In other words, this particular dynamic gift that contains great power demonstrates precisely the kind of dynamic flow that Emerson described. The gift of the spirituals is not simply an African American gift to a white America. It is an example of a unique American gift that is constituted by a dynamic flow that blends racial, religious, and secular sources in noneconomic ways that are impossible to measure who is indebted to whom. Even when Du Bois asks in the final pages, “Your country? How came it yours?” and reminds us, “Before the Pilgrims landed we were here,” it is to call attention to the story of how African Americans brought their “gifts and mingled them with yours” (162). Instead of a passive reception, Du Bois says, “Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving?” (162-3).

Although Du Bois writes about the gifts of music and soul in his classic *The Souls of Black Folk*, it was not until 1924 that he made them his main subject in *The Gift of Black Folk*. As part of a series on “the Racial Contributions to the United States” in order to counter anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment in the 1920s, Du Bois argues that America was made and will continue to be remade by the contribution of gifts. While other volumes focus on the role of the Germans, Irish, or Dutch in the making of the US, Du Bois in separate chapters writes about how the gifts of black explorers, laborers, and soldiers helped found America, just as the gifts of black women, artists, writers, and religious leaders will help fulfill American ideals of democracy and freedom. Without such gifts, Du Bois argues, there would be no America if it were defined by its ideals. But in what sense are these all gifts? What Du Bois suggests is that a nation is constituted by racial contributions that can be called gifts if there are expressions of gratitude beyond the fulfillment of particular economic or legal obligations. And what gratitude releases are dynamic gifts that will empower us to complete the good work of democracy already begun.

To remind us of the gifts that constitute the nation’s existence and progress, Du Bois writes the following lines in a prescript that opens the book:

Who made America? Who made this land that swings its empire from the Atlantic to the Sea of Peace and from Snow of Fire—this realm of New Freedom, with Opportunity and Ideal unlimited?

Now that its foundations are laid, deep but bare, there are those as always who would forget the humble builders, toiling wan mornings and blazing noons, and picture America as the last reasoned blossom of mighty ancestors; of those

great and glorious world builders and rulers who know and see and do all things forever and ever, amen! How singular and blind! For the glory of the world is the possibilities of the commonplace and America is America even because it shows, as never before, the power of the common, ordinary, unlovely man. This is real democracy and not that vain and eternal striving to regard the world as the abiding place of exceptional genius with great black wastes of hereditary idiots.

We who know may not forget but must forever spread the splendid sordid truth that out of the most lowly and persecuted of men, Man made America. And that what Man has here begun with all its want and imperfection, with all its magnificent promise and grotesque failure will some day blossom in the souls of the Lowly.

In this passage Du Bois offers a revisionist history that shifts the proper object of our gratitude or democratic piety from mighty ancestors to humble builders, from exceptional genius to the power of the common and ordinary. If we acknowledge gratitude for or to them, then even their toil can become, as Du Bois calls it, a gift. He capitalizes Man as Emerson did in "The American Scholar," which signifies our common source of power. It is this dynamic power, figured again in the trope of the flower, from which "the most lowly and persecuted of men" draw to make America. The gifts of black folk are rooted in dynamic sources of our common wealth and humanity. Du Bois's task in this book is to remind us of our responsibility to express gratitude and as a result see their contributions as gifts that constitute the sources of our existence and progress through life.

What makes this notion of gratitude democratic is that it results in more solidarity with those whose gifts have contributed to greater principles of democracy instead of resulting in deference or loyalty to an authoritative body that predetermines how precisely gratitude should be demonstrated. Like Lincoln's unfinished work, Du Bois does not say much more than that there remains a "magnificent promise" that "will someday blossom." His objective throughout the book is mainly historical. It is more descriptive rather than prescriptive, and so it stops short of determining in advance what counts as gratitude. But to say Du Bois relies on a rhetoric of gifts and gratitude (instead of rights and equality as he does elsewhere) is not to suggest that this mode of rhetoric is apolitical. Gratitude as a form of democratic piety does not mean we ought to abandon liberal notions of justice. Instead, Du Bois's rhetoric of gifts and the kind of gratitude it inspires can potentially open people up to hear the call for justice. By positioning us in a posture of gratitude (not deference), we gain access to recognize the gifts of black folk that thereby empower us for political action. In this sense, gratitude mediates dynamic gifts that empower us toward our ideals of democratic justice. Then, gratitude is vital because it allows us to experience and do what we otherwise might not. It must at the very least obligate us to listen to and not forget the sources of our existence and progress through life. And this is precisely what Du Bois asks of his readers in the concluding postscript: "listen to the Souls that wing and thrill and weep and scream and sob and sing above it all," above all the experiences of slavery and sacrifice. "What shall these things mean, O God the Reader?" Du Bois says, only "You know. You know" (126). By leaving the meaning to the reader, Du Bois takes a risk that is inherent to a democratic rhetoric of gifts. The risk is allowing recipients to determine

how they will imagine what constitutes a proper response of gratitude. It reminds us that we have an obligation to express gratitude (contra liberalism), but it stops just short of defining in advance what that ought to look like (contra traditionalism). Gifts, mediated by gratitude, motivate and empower without any guarantees in advance. This more democratized notion is what keeps the gift and gratitude from being reduced entirely to categories of economy and law.¹²⁴ And as long as there is no authoritative body that defines in advance how precisely that gratitude ought to be expressed, a pragmatist understanding of democratic piety can respond by saying, just as much as our soldiers, the Chinese and African Americans are deserving of our gratitude. For gratitude results not in submission but in solidarity or what Emerson called a dynamic flow.

Gratitude, not deference, is how democratic piety is expressed toward the sources of our existence and progress through life. Without this democratized notion of gratitude that remains open to both our historical past and political future, we might close off access to what Stout calls the “spiritual wherewithal, the moral fiber, to act.” In other words, gratitude is a particular mode of language that mediates the reception of dynamic gifts that are not only historically rooted, but also politically motivated. Such gifts, as I have been interpreting them from the writings of especially Emerson, James, and Du Bois, constitute a broad pragmatist conception of dynamic gifts and gratitude

¹²⁴ In *Gifts: A Study in Comparative Law*, Richard Hyland argues that the contractual model is insufficient for regulating the gift because gifts in many ways operate illogically according to the market: “Gift giving seems to be beyond the reach of the conceptual framework of the market-oriented private law.” And more radically, he writes, “To some extent, it is even beyond the reach of the law [... It] is constituted outside the law by the social and familial relationships that imply obligations to give, to receive, and to reciprocate.” My sense is that Du Bois turned to a rhetoric of gifts and gratitude because he understood precisely these limits to models of economic and legal contract when it came to racial justice.

that empower us to continue reaching for the ideals of freedom or justice we have inherited from what Stout calls our “democratic tradition.” It is a tradition that consists in part of literary sources both religious and secular. And as is often the case in the nineteenth century, the religious and secular are very often rhetorically mixed in complicated layers within the same text. Expressing gratitude for such mixed texts means reading and teaching them with an openness to their dynamic gifts, evaluating them critically by the standards of democratic ideals, and then pragmatically appropriating them as sources of inspiration, agency, and empowerment.

Thus, my proposal for a religious pragmatist approach to the study of literature and religion moves beyond the kinds of secular pragmatism and religious traditionalism we saw earlier. It reads texts as critical and yet constructive resources to work toward more democratic ends. This means first of all being committed to a democratic ethics and politics, and secondly to paying attention to the various religious and secular sources within a text that can empower and sustain us for the first. My intention here is not to minimize differences or ignore significant contradictions that can arise when religious and secular aims mix. Indeed, I take for granted that stronger readings of our religious and secular sources that highlight their differences and even contradictions provide important correctives to one another. My hope is only not to exaggerate them in such a way that prevents liberals and traditionalists from working to achieve a common purpose. I am also not suggesting, of course, that all approaches to the study of literature and religion conform to this proposal. I am only trying to make one modest effort at what Stout calls “a vocation of imaginative redescription.” That is the use of our poetic and critical powers to describe and redescribe the religious and secular sources

of our democratic progress and imagine how best to respond to them. By describing and redescribing a rhetoric of gifts and gratitude, my objective has been to remind others that religious sources and democratic ends need not necessarily entail an absolute contradiction. My argument is there must be alternative interpretations that offer a more nuanced account of religious history and literary criticism in response to critics who rely on a secularization narrative. Let me illustrate this approach by contrasting it to two recent literary critics who assume the secularization thesis.

As a way of introducing what is at stake in the study of religion and literature, Roger Lundin writes in more than one place about an experience told by the Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor. The story goes like this. O'Connor was invited to dine with the novelist and atheist Mary McCarthy, who "intimidated her younger, fiction-writing guest." O'Connor does not say anything until at one point the conversation turns to the subject of the Eucharist, "which I, being the Catholic," Lundin quotes O'Connor, "was obviously supposed to defend." After McCarthy said the host was nothing more than "a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one [O'Connor] then said, in a very shaky voice, 'Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.'" Lundin calls this story "a parable of sorts for the 'religion and literature' project, for it gets at the heart of the tensions and changes that have marked this modern endeavor from the beginning" ("Prospects" 289-290). The tension is between what he calls McCarthy's "aestheticizing dismissal of the sacramental faith" and O'Connor's view that "it is the center of existence." Lundin finds it "interesting that at that time, despite her reduction of sacrament to symbol, McCarthy could have fit neatly into the academy's religion and literature niche, working, perhaps, in the myth and symbol division. For her promotion of the 'portable' Holy Spirit was not

all that far removed from the aestheticism of Charles Eliot Norton” who championed “a generic ‘Religion of the Future’ as an alternative to traditional Christianity” (291). But according to Lundin, even this debate has been rendered irrelevant today by historical materialists who view both sides “suspiciously as agents of empire or sources of oppression” (294). And quoting the literary critic Jenny Franchot, Lundin argues that this is the historical narrative that turned religion into an “invisible domain.”

In a slightly earlier work of criticism, Lundin relies on the same historical narrative, but one that more aggressively critiques “the dramatic shift in cultural authority” toward an increasing secularization of American intellectual culture (*From Nature to Experience* 2). As his title indicates, Lundin examines the shift from nature to experience, which reflects the emergence of twentieth-century secular pragmatism (e.g. Rorty and Fish) defined as “an attempt to extract from experience the very standards by which that experience is then to be judged” (9). For Lundin who draws explicitly on the theology of Barth and the Barthian ethicist Hauerwas, this shift is problematic because it always runs up against “the ironic limits of experience” that make it impossible to judge our experience.¹²⁵ Instead, Lundin wants to recover an older tradition, as Barth did, one that says “truth must be grounded in God’s own acts of sacrificial self-disclosure, rather than the vagaries of experience or the mechanics of nature” (10). Emerson and James are the sources that led to the vagaries of pragmatists like Rorty and Fish, who draw also from the hermeneutics of suspicion to close off the possibility of the gift of divine revelation.

¹²⁵ In addition to drawing on Barthian theology, Lundin says he is drawing on Gadamerian hermeneutics also. Indeed, he places both Barth and Gadamer as figures against Rorty and Fish. My own reading of these figures on the notion of experience, however, would place Gadamer somewhere between Barth and Rorty/Fish.

I return to Lundin again partly because of his prominent role in this field. His work represents well the kind of religious traditionalism we examined earlier that defines itself over against the work of secular pragmatists. To be sure, there are some serious, perhaps even irreconcilable points of difference between Lundin and Rorty when it comes to their definitions of religion. My concern along with Stout is the way these debates are framed without any attention to other areas of common interest. Can there be no common ground from which pragmatists and traditionalists can work together toward democratic ends? It is difficult to even imagine such a ground, at least the way Lundin tells the story. In contrast, my approach to the study of literature and religion insists that imagining such spaces is just as important as drawing clear lines. My problem is the historical line that Lundin draws from Emerson and James to Rorty and Fish is neither inevitable nor uncontested. There are other kinds of pragmatists and Christian traditions to choose from. But Lundin makes the line between these two groups out to be an unbridgeable chasm. In fact, some of the best criticisms of Rorty and Fish have come from those I am calling religious pragmatists.¹²⁶ Burying West and Gunn in footnotes and ignoring Mailloux, Lundin only sees “key differences between the experiential tradition [e.g. pragmatism] and Christian belief” in his brief comments on Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition*, a book whose central premise is to mediate between these two groups (*From Nature to Experience* 195). What this reading also ignores is other Christian ways to think about the Eucharist besides McCarthy’s aestheticizing dismissal and O’Connor’s sacramental realism. A large number of Protestants can even say with McCarthy that the host is nothing more than a symbol without dismissing its

¹²⁶ Their criticisms can be found in the works from which I have taken all of the chapter’s epigraphs.

importance. And on many ethical and political issues, many would perhaps find themselves somewhere between McCarthy and O'Connor, between Rorty and Hauerwas, perhaps not too far from Stout, West, Gunn, and Mailloux.

Against these more antagonistic themes that dominate his narrative of religious and literary history in the US, there are, however, some hints at and possible openings for nuance in his more recent work. In *Invisible Conversations* (2009), Lundin's essay follows and responds to one written by Hauerwas and Wood, who critique the "Constantinian" marriage between church and, if not quite state, then American culture. Whereas in earlier works he uncritically draws upon Hauerwas, Lundin says here he prefers "to believe it possible to differ with Hauerwas and Wood on certain details even as I resonate with their larger argument about the oblique relationship of Christianity to many of America's finest writers" (188). From there, Lundin goes on to suggest how more careful readings of nineteenth-century American writers might complicate the story. Indeed, that is what I have been trying to do with my close readings of Emerson and James, which should complicate any simple notion that religion has been eclipsed by secular forces and now needs to be recovered with all the force of tradition. Perhaps there was a time for that kind of militant rhetoric just so that religious voices could be heard. Even if that is true, my hope is we can now set it aside to listen to those who find themselves somewhere in between. I am hopeful that Lundin is open to such a suggestion when he points to "a larger hermeneutical dynamic" that includes what Paul Ricoeur has called a "double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen" ("Prospects" 295). It is not clear whether this willingness to listen includes pragmatists. If

it does, then much will depend on how we interpret the sources of our democratic piety.¹²⁷

In a much less polemical work of criticism, Hildegard Hoeller offers the only book-length study of the gift in American literature. *From Gifts to Commodity: Capitalism and Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (2012) offers strong and insightful readings of how the gift and “its collision with the market” fundamentally structures the plots and themes of several novels from Hannah Foster’s *Coquette* (1797) to Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899). Between Foster’s novel about sacrifice as a gift that “ritualistically reconnects the sacred and the profane” (48) and Norris’s about “the fall from gift exchange to market exchange and to the lethal realm of the ‘antigift’” (17), Hoeller traces the dialectic between gift and economy in novels by Lydia Maria Child (*Hobomok* 1824), Susan Warner (*Wide, Wide World* 1850), William Wells Brown (*Clotel* 1853), Herman Melville (*The Confidence-Man* 1857), and William Dean Howells (*The Rise of Silas Lapham* 1885). At her best, represented by her close readings, Hoeller states, “gifts and commodities cannot maintain an oppositional distance” (2). Although not intended to be a contribution to the field of religion and literature (but of economics and literature), she relies on the theories of Derrida and Lewis Hyde to argue there is a central connection between gift and religion: “What draws both men to the gift is that it alone, as *alogos* in Derrida’s terms and as alternative logic in Hyde’s, can be goodness; the gift is connected to God” (10). Her overall objective, she says, is to bring “two different critical approaches (a materialist, essentially Marxist one and an

¹²⁷ As mentioned early in this chapter, one way to nuance our telling of American religious history might be to shift the theological focus from Christology, which traditionally relies on more economic language and figures explicitly in Lundin’s work because of the influence of Barth, to Pneumatology.

anthropological/philosophical approach) in dialogue with each other in order to show that, as [John] Frow notes, gift and market exchange ‘partake of each other’” (3).

However, contrary to this language of partaking, the overall historical narrative that emerges from her outline largely follows the secularization thesis even as she tries to resist its conclusion. Not only do individual authors and novels examine the collision between gift and market, but she also argues that nineteenth-century fiction enacts a movement from gift to market: “reading chronologically from the end of the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century we can see that, as capitalism in its various forms takes a firmer hold on American culture, the gift appears to be a more and more difficult, yet always utterly necessary, concept to uphold” (14). After a strong and even devastating analysis of capitalism’s firm grasp in her last chapter on *McTeague*, Hoeller nevertheless ends her last sentence by writing that “our humanity is tied to the gift” (230). This points to an unresolved tension in her argument. On the one hand, she wants to hold onto the possibilities that gifts can enable the friendships and communities that constitute our humanity.¹²⁸ On the other hand, she argues more convincingly how “the greatest gift given in the novel” (230), which she says is the golden tooth, remains in the Derridean sense unaccountable, unspeakable, and therefore impossible because of capitalism’s stronghold: “Looking back on the

¹²⁸ On the connection between the gift and humanity, Hoeller writes, “There is a suggestion here that gift exchange—a peaceful, humane network of human relations—is part of human nature. Characters only abandon this human behavior when they are seduced into thinking in market terms and thus turn from giving to legal stealing, from a gift community to the perverse realm of the antigift. And in this realm—an almost inevitable realm once one is seduced to exploit the gift through the logic of the market—elemental and horrible violence and atavism is unleashed. In a perverse defense of one’s humanity—which can only exist within the realm of the gift—Norris’s characters revert to the atavistic and destructive forces [Donald] Pizer describes. In this impossible struggle, Norris indeed creates great tragedy” (228-9).

nineteenth century, Norris depicts with utter clarity the horrible depletion of the gift in light of the logic of capitalism. He shows how the overwhelming logic of market exchange invades the lives of his characters and posits at the same time the necessity of gift exchange for their humanity” (229). The gift is necessary but silent and ultimately powerless against the logic of capitalism.

This tension remains despite two brief suggestions on the very last page about how it can be resolved. One is to point to the golden tooth, which she says “marks the limits of Norris’s scientific method and his materialist view of the world since we never see how and why Trina gets the tooth, how she pays for it, and why she gives it” (230). Hoeller seems to want to blame Norris’s naturalism as ultimately making the gift impossible. I think this is a point that can be developed much further, but it is not clear to me how any account of the golden tooth could have resolved the tension between the gift’s depletion and its necessity. If anything, as Derrida points out, an account of the gift is precisely what will result in its absorption into economy. Another suggestion is that although the gift disappears into a market logic at the level of the novel’s plot, Hoeller says it is preserved with the presence of the novel itself: “Here, in Norris’s art, the novel’s ‘logic’ fundamentally bows to and affirms the spirit of the gift. Norris, the artist, gives the story to us as a gift, and in that very gesture defies the most devastating conclusion of the novel [...] As much as it may appear that ‘*McTeague* depicts a world bereft of supernatural or spiritual significance,’ Norris paradoxically combats that view of the world simply by depicting it, by giving us a story about it” (230). When Hoeller makes this suggestion, she is drawing less on Derrida and more on Hyde’s notion of art

as participating in a gift economy. But making such a move at the end without further elaboration amounts to avoiding the tension rather than resolving it.

Although I find these last suggestions underdeveloped and unconvincing—which is to say I find her account of secularization much stronger—I am very sympathetic to her claim that the gift is, as she says, an utterly necessary concept to preserve. Hoeller offers strong Derridean readings that demonstrate how the gift disappears in its collision with economy, but her attempts to put forward a positive reconstruction of the gift are precisely where her argument falls short. In other words, we have learned to deconstruct the gift and unmask the ways it can be used for exploitation, but we have no, or weak, theoretical framework to mediate its reception to access its dynamic and democratic possibilities. One reason is her economic framework cannot account for the gift other than as a commodity or object of exchange. But if we can expand our hermeneutic framework beyond economy to include newer and broader histories of religious concepts like dynamic gifts and gratitude, then it is possible to develop alternative ways of reading these concepts and appropriating their dynamic sources of empowerment. Then, an account of the gift in nineteenth-century American culture can resist a secularization narrative that assumes what Hoeller calls “the horrible depletion of the gift in light of the logic of capitalism” (229).

There are two ways to resist such inevitable conclusions. Even if we focus only on novels,¹²⁹ we must begin first by pointing to other texts that thematize the gift’s dynamic possibilities. Just two examples are *In His Steps* (1896) by the Christian

¹²⁹ My discussion here leaves out the relevance of the gift to poetry, which can open up other avenues for thinking the gift in American literature. For a wonderful discussion of the gift in Whitman, see Lewis Hyde’s chapter “A Draft of Whitman” in his book *The Gift*.

socialist and Social Gospel advocate Charles Sheldon and Charles Chesnutt's more well-known *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Sheldon's novel offers a positive imaginative narrative that depicts how gifts can motivate benevolence and counter devastating effects of industrial capitalism. The fact that it was a huge bestseller and that it inspired liberal Protestants even decades after the Social Gospel movement demonstrate that the gift is far from depletion. Chesnutt's novel, written at the height of racist violence toward African Americans and the failure of our legal and political institutions to address adequately what Du Bois called the problem of the color line, ends not with the sinister triumph of capitalism. Instead, it ends with the gift of forgiveness that offers a poignant alternative to Norris's novel even as Chesnutt acknowledges in the very last words of the novel, "There's time enough, but none to spare" (329). The presence of Social Gospel and African American writers who employ the language of gifts and gratitude should make us suspicious of historical narratives that suggest the work of realists like Howells or naturalists like Norris is indicative of the gift's decline at the end of the nineteenth century.

Following this last point, if we develop more nuanced religious histories and broader ways of defining the gift, as I have tried to do, I think we can take one step further and read even novels like *McTeague* against the grain. While Hoeller handles admirably the thematics of the gift in her last two chapters on Howells and Norris—these last two chapters constitute part 3 of her book called "Fading Gifts and Rising Profits"—neither of their conclusions about fading gifts is inevitable. In *McTeague*, for example, I see strong evidence against Hoeller's assumption that it depicts a world where supernatural or spiritual significance is entirely absent. If not spiritual or

supernatural, then what do we call that “something” that drives McTeague to flee into Death Valley? Even against the narrator who asks at one point, “What animal cunning, what brute instinct clamored for recognition and obedience? What lower faculty was it that roused his suspicion, that drove him out into the night a score of times between dark and dawn?” (Norris 390), it has to be a faculty more than brute instinct since none of the animals, neither the dog nor bird nor donkey with him are ever aware of it when it comes. At the very least, this “strange sixth sense” and “unseen hand” (a metaphor that ought to remind us of not only of market capitalism but also divine providence) ought to elicit comparisons to other historical accounts at the end of the century of the kind of spiritual intuitions that led James to describe them as gifts.

A more significant difficulty I have with reading the novel as completely bereft of the spiritual is its depiction of Death Valley as “openly and unreservedly iniquitous and malignant” (Norris 425). In addition to other deeply religious imagery including a kind of staring contest between McTeague and a rattlesnake (420), the valley becomes “a thing of terror” (425) that takes on Levinasian dimensions. Levinas’s concept of the existence of an infinite horror prior to nothingness finds striking parallels in Norris’s description of Death Valley¹³⁰: “Before him and upon either side, to the north and to the east and to

¹³⁰ In “There is: Existence without Existents,” Levinas describes a nothingness or, more precisely, the existence of the infinite prior to all things given including nothingness. This notion of the infinite, however, does not simply point to the presence of a divine figure: “Rather than to a God, the notion of the there is leads us to the absence of God, the absence of any being” (33). And yet, it is to “live before all Revelation, before the light comes,” which suggests that it is the condition from which Heidegger’s *es gibt* can even begin to give anything. As the source of horror, the “there is” is theologically speaking a description of something that goes back both to the nothingness before creation, as well as to the long tradition of the Hebrew concept of *sheol* (hell). Credit for making this connection goes to Brian Garcia, who first pointed this out while we were both reading Norris and Levinas in two separate seminars.

the south, stretched primordial desolation. League upon league the infinite reaches of dazzling white alkali laid themselves out like an immeasurable scroll unrolled from horizon to horizon” (424-5). This is relevant because Levinas himself says his concept is often found precisely in the work of realists and naturalists:

The misunderstood art of certain realistic and naturalistic novelists, their prefaces and professions of faith to the contrary, produces the same effect: beings and things that collapse into their ‘materiality’, are terrifyingly present in their destiny, weight and shape. Certain passages of Huysmans or Zola, the calm and smiling horror of de Maupassant’s tales do not only give, as is sometimes thought, a representation ‘faithful to’ or exceeding reality, but penetrate behind the form which light reveals into that materiality which, far from corresponding to the philosophical materialism of the authors, constitutes the dark background of existence. It makes things appear to us in a night, like the monotonous presence that bears down on us in insomnia. (32)

What I am only suggesting here is the possibility of rethinking what the gift can represent in Norris’s novel. In doing so, I do not mean to suggest that Levinas is simply a pragmatist, but I find it interesting that several scholars have found sufficient ground to argue that reading Levinas through James and vice versa can be productive.¹³¹ If there can be something like a pragmatic phenomenology to help us think about Emerson and James in relation to not only Levinas but also Gadamer and others, then it could certainly help us to expand how we read religious phenomena like gifts in even

¹³¹ See Bernstein, “Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy”; Rosenthal, “A Time for Being Ethical: Levinas and Pragmatism.”; and Megan, *Levinas and James: Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology*.

naturalist novels like *McTeague*. It is true that certain gifts that can be objectified disappears into economy throughout the novel; however, it is possible to see this not as the depletion of the gift in the logic of capitalism, but as a transcendence that dissolves all binaries between subject/giver and object/receiver or between even life and death itself. Thus, Norris's novel ends with McTeague handcuffed to Marcus, whom he has just killed while "All about him, vast, interminable, stretched the measureless leagues of Death Valley" (442).

In concluding with Lundin and Hoeller, my aim has been to show the way two literary critics describe how religious concepts including the gift have been eclipsed by secularism. While Lundin (like Hauerwas and Milbank) look to retrieve traditional sources in the past, Hoeller (like Rorty and Derrida) hold onto certain ideals yet to be realized in a distant future. The task of a pragmatist, however, is always to keep open the possibilities of reinterpreting the past as an essential resource for the present while aiming for democratic possibilities in the future. What I am calling a religious pragmatism is simply the application of pragmatism to the area of religion in all its complexity, not some particular brand of systematic theology. Rather than perpetuate ideological narratives about secularism's progress or decline, religious pragmatists insist with Emerson that ours is an age somewhere in between with stairs leading up or down but whose origin and destination are never quite fully in sight. To pursue our highest ideals of democracy and justice in such a situation requires less polemics about secularization and more of what Stout calls hope, which goes hand in hand with other

democratic virtues such as gratitude and generosity.¹³² Religious pragmatism is about practicing these democratic virtues, each corresponding to the theological gifts of faith, hope, and love, in order to open up dynamic sources of power that I have claimed can be found in American literature.

As an attempt to mediate between secular pragmatism and religious traditionalism, this approach to the study of American literature highlights its ethical and political possibilities. In the midst of our so-called “crisis in the humanities,” what religious pragmatism offers is one more justification for what Rorty once called the “inspirational value of great works of literature,” which is essentially a pragmatist argument for the gifts of literature or what he calls the “genius, charisma, individual

¹³² Gratitude, hope, and generosity are Stout’s terms for the three theological virtues (*DT* 9). His definition of hope in the context of laying out a democratic social criticism between secular liberalism and religious traditionalism speaks directly to what I have been trying to do throughout this dissertation. Here is the full passage where Stout offers his pragmatist definition of hope: “Democratic hope, whether tempered by Augustinian ambivalence or a blues sensibility like Ellison’s, is the hope of making a difference for the better by democratic means. The question of hope is whether a difference can be made, not whether progress is being made or whether human beings will work it all out in the end. You are still making a difference when you are engaged in a successful holding action against the forces that are conspiring to make things worse than they are. You are even making a difference when your actions simply keep things from worsening to the extent they would have worsened if you had not acted. The failure to achieve progress, though common enough in democratic experience, should not be allowed to stop democratic aspiration altogether. There is still a beneficial role for democratic efforts even in regressive eras, if only a difference can be made. If you make hope depend on the thought that things are going to keep getting better, or on the thought that things will all work out in the end, then you are bound to be demoralized before long. There is no persuasive evidence for members of our generation that things are getting better on the whole or that everything will work out in historical time. If, however, you set your sights on making a difference, you can give hope a foothold in the life of the people itself. Hope is not the only ingredient that goes into the work of justice. Courage, imagination, practical wisdom, generosity, sympathy, and luck all play their parts. But without hope, the other ingredients count for nothing. It is therefore no small matter for democratic citizens to find reasons for hope in the here and now, whatever their religious differences might be. This is a task that Augustinians can share with the likes of Ellison and Emerson” (58-9).

brush strokes, prophets, and demiurges” (*Achieving Our Country* 129). As mentioned earlier, I find Rorty’s insistence on a secular replacement of religion unnecessary and his strong oppositional framework between cultural and literary studies unfortunate.¹³³ But rather than emphasize again the distance between his secular and my religious pragmatism, I want to end by expressing an agreement with his central claim that “A humanistic discipline is in good shape only when it produces both inspiring works and works which contextualize, and thereby deromanticize and debunk, those inspiring works” (134). This is basically the same thing as what Lundin called “a larger hermeneutical dynamic” that includes not only suspicion, but also listening. And ultimately what secular pragmatists and religious traditionalists both share as a common ground is a deep concern about character, about the kinds of people shaped by our education. For Rorty, the most important question is whether our universities can produce someone like Irving Howe with his commitment to a democratic socialism. For Hauerwas, that figure is Dorothy Day and her exemplary witness through the Catholic Worker Movement.¹³⁴ Even as two exemplary figures of democratic socialism, differences between Howe and Day are inevitable and important. But it would be absurd to think the sources that produced them were entirely secular or solely religious. What Rorty and Hauerwas from their different perspectives are asking us to consider are the ethical and political sources of American literature that can open up dynamic gifts of power to drive and sustain us to reach for our highest ideals. A religious pragmatist approach to a charismological study of American literature is an attempt to express

¹³³ For an excellent critique of this opposition, see Mailloux (1999) “Rhetorical Pragmatism and the Uses of Literature.”

¹³⁴ See Hauerwas’s views on “The Church and the University” in his Gifford Lectures published as *With the Grain of the Universe*, 231-240.

gratitude for the dynamic gifts that have produced both Howe and Day, Rorty and Hauerwas, Lundin and Hoeller, Derrida and Milbank, so that we might find between them just enough common ground from which to keep on giving.

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