Without Mary, man had no hope except in Atheism, and for Atheism the world was not ready. Hemmed back on that side, men rushed like sheep to escape the butcher, and were driven to Mary; only too happy in finding protection and hope in a being who could understand the language they talked, and the excuses they had to offer. How passionately they worshipped Mary, the Cathedral of Chartres shows; and how this worship elevated the whole sex, all the literature and history of the time proclaim. If you need more proof, you can read more Petrarch; but still one cannot realize how actual Mary was, to the men and women of the middle-ages, and how she was present, as a matter of course, whether by way of miracle or as a habit of life, throughout their daily existence. The surest measure of her reality is the enormous money value they put on her assistance, and the art that was lavished on her gratification, but an almost equally certain sign is the casual allusion, the chance reference to her, which assumes her presence.

—Henry Adams, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1904)

Ellen I'm not real—oh make me real—You are all of you real!

—Marian (“Clover”) Hooper Adams (1885)

They were avoiding the serious, standing off, anxiously, from the real.

—Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (1904)
At the beginning of the twentieth century, Henry Adams wrote the history of an earlier century through the study of what he believed to be its major accomplishments—Mont Saint Michel, Chartres, the life of Francis of Assisi, and the theology of Thomas Aquinas. For Adams, the years 1150 to 1250 expressed the essence of a time that was to be fundamentally transformed by the forces of modernity. An age is defined, Adams argues, by the site from which force emanates: hence his distinction, in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), between the Virgin—the Mary of the Christian Middle Ages—and the Dynamo. Both, as centers of force, are real.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, I found myself preoccupied with the question of what it might mean to say that the Virgin is real—actual, present, palpable—in one time and place and not in another. The question is vital, I think, to writing the history of religion. For Adams, history is always the history of forces. The Virgin was a force; hence the Virgin was real. In positing the reality of the Virgin in the Middle Ages, Adams suggests her veridicality: she exists in the world, able to effect the actions of human beings. Adams does not say whether her veridicality depends on the creative power of the human imagination or is, instead, independent of human desires, practices, and aspirations. In *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, he points to these crucial theological and philosophical questions when he asks whether Mary is actual “by way of miracle or as a habit of life.” (As we will see, he is significantly less reticent—or rather, his characters are—about answering these questions in his earlier novel *Esther*, published in 1884.)

In most of the essays collected here I too focus on medieval Christianity, particularly on texts in which people claim that they or others around them encounter, talk to, see, smell, taste, feel, and hear spirits, saints, angels, demons, and, of course, God. Any attempt to understand the claims made by these writings immediately opens onto vital ontological and epistemological questions. What does it mean to say that the object of religious devotion is real? If something is real, are propositions about it also true? If such propositions are true, in what way are they so? If we posit the veridicality of the saints, angels, demons, and God encountered by medieval Christians, and hence the truth of claims about them, are we simply acknowledging the creative power of the human imagination or are we asserting that these entities exist independently of human practice?

Today, those working in the human sciences have become adept at distinguishing between what is real for the people they study and what is real for
some putatively generalizable “us.” Calls for imagination, empathy, and respect generally fall short, explicitly or implicitly, from assertions that what is real for religious people is also true, at least in the sense of that term generally presumed by contemporary historians, anthropologists, sociologists, textual critics, philosophers—even often theologians. A number of scholars in religious studies argue that for medieval people, Mary is real; they cede, furthermore, that premodern Christians believed Mary to be irreducible to human knowledge, practice, or desire. Yet the methodological skepticism and agnosticism of modern Western scholarship (mirroring that of much modern Western philosophy) generally require that we deny or bracket the question of whether it is true for us that Mary, as Virgin Queen of Heaven, exists or existed—of whether she is or was an ontological force in the world independent of human practices and relationships. In Adams’s terms, the modern world is ready for atheism, perhaps even unable to think critically and coherently outside of its terms. Mary may be very real for believers, but the claim that Mary existed or exists as an independent being is at worst untrue and at best one the historian, given the constraints of her field and its methodologies, cannot answer.

Lest we think that the distinction between the real and the true—between that which an individual palpably experiences and hence inexorably takes to be the case and what is the case from the standpoint of a third-party witness—is a thoroughly modern one, there is ample evidence that such a distinction was operative within the Christian Middle Ages. Not every vision was understood to be a vision of God or of demons; sometimes, medieval authors view the visionary as sick, deluded, or insane. (Sometimes, even, people made up stories to entertain and astonish others; and sometimes, of course, they lied.) And yet the desire to move from compelling experience—what is palpably real for the one who undergoes it—to claims for independently verifiable truth of that which is experienced seems inexorable. History, the human science on which I focus most attention in the essays collected here, is, as a discipline, premised on a critical engagement with this movement. It is precisely here that the following essays pause.

The true and the real are intimately tied in the modern human sciences—or, in terms more often used in the contemporary academy, in the humanities and social sciences—to the practice of critique. So with the questions outlined above also comes the question of whether history is necessarily a critical endeavor, with critique understood in a quite specific way. The critical historian, for example, stubbornly pushes against unreflective acceptance of her sources, continually testing them against one another in order to sort out the true from the false.
This is work in which I have an enormous investment, as a number of the essays collected here attest. For Adams, it is one of the crucial distinctions between what he calls the science of history and antiquarianism. The other key factor for Adams is that history, to be scientific, must be theoretical. It must, he insists, give an account of history as a unified whole—hence be philosophical; the antiquarian, on the other hand, is content with fragments. Adams did not hesitate to argue for the reality, the actuality, and the truth of Mary for medieval Christians, but he is able to do so because he assumes that she is no longer an active presence in the world.

As should be obvious to contemporary readers, Henry Adams’s insistence that Mary was a real force in the Christian Middle Ages but that she is not in early-twentieth-century America ignores the persistence, in his own time, of claims that spirits, ancestors, saints, angels, and deities are present in the world and that they play a vital role in the experience of those who encounter them. Of course, such claims persist into the present. Christianity did not lose all of its force in modernity, nor have other religious traditions that have come into contact with the modernizing and secularizing power of certain forms of modern Western rationality. Nor did Christianity become, as some hoped, a fully rational or naturalized religion. So while it may be true, as Charles Taylor argues, that in the premodern West atheism was not a live option and that the modern West is governed by a social imaginary in which what Taylor calls the supernatural does not necessarily play a role, the fact remains that in almost every part of the world people continue to engage in religious practices and to make claims about their experience of and encounters with modes of being irreducible to the human. Questions Adams thought he could relegate to the past are very much alive in the present; for many in modernity, both the Virgin and the Dynamo are real.

In a number of the essays collected here, I ask what it might look like if we were to entertain the notion that what others encounter as real might also be true, not just for them and not solely as a force generated by acts of the human imagination. Most importantly, I want to ask whether the methods others—in this case religious people of a particular sort, those who encounter and interact with ghosts, spirits, saints, demons, or God—use to determine what is real and what is true might challenge the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of modern history, themselves grounded in central presumptions of modern Western philosophy. For whether we acknowledge it or not, there is a theory—there are many theories—underlying contemporary historical work and the study of religion, most prominently a kind of naturalism that assumes everything in
human history can be explained in terms of the operations of the natural world and of human beings, themselves a part of that world.” Truth is unquestioningly identified with empirical truth, which in discussions of the human means either scientific or historical truth, a historical truth that is assumed to operate in naturalistic terms. (I discuss this further in “Gender, Agency, and the Divine.”)

To push against these presumptions—or in my case to allow the texts I study to push against them—entails real risks; we know that the presences—and absences—that populate the worlds in which we live give rise to confusion, conflict, and violence, as well as to the certainty, security, and joy for which Adams was nostalgic. Reason, articulated broadly within Western modernity as entailing the verifiability of belief by independent observers, has been essential to keeping certain kinds of conflict in check. From this standpoint, many contemporary scholars of religion assume that the best we can do is to acknowledge that religion is the product—often the very vital and active product—of human acts of the imagination; this is as real, many imply, as we can allow religion to be.

This is probably closer to what I think than my argument thus far would suggest, and yet there is an important, if subtle, difference. The clearest articulation of my current views can be found in “Acute Melancholia.” It appears in the form of a fiction that insists on leaving room for something irreducible to individual or collective acts of the imagination. I there tentatively hold out the possibility of a transcendence that occurs between people, or between people and the world around them, and yet is irreducible to the various parties in the relationship, perhaps even to the relationship itself. I hesitate to give a solely humanist or naturalizing account of religion because of my own experience, as “Acute Melancholia” attempts to show, but also because of my study of Christianity and my desire to understand what it is in Christianity, as in other religious traditions, that resists such accounts.

My project in these essays, then, is not governed in any simple sense by nostalgia for a lost historical past; the vitality of Christianity—and of many other religions—surrounds me, even if I do not share in its practices and often find them, in their contemporary forms, dull or repugnant. Like the anthropologist Saba Mahmood, whose work plays an important role in my thinking, my concerns are political and ethical—I would add, given my own training and predilections, theological and philosophical. As an anthropologist, Mahmood takes the living women and men whom she studies not only as objects of analysis, but also as subjects able to offer meaningful accounts of their own practices. Again, at stake is not nostalgia for some putatively lost religious past, but
instead an ethically and politically motivated encounter with living religious subjects. Mahmood asks, together with a host of other scholars in the study of religion, whether we can have a meaningful engagement with subjects whose self-understanding we presume from the outset to be false or misguided. How can we begin with such assumptions and ever hope to understand?

In a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Elizabeth A. Pritchard condemns a number of scholars who pursue this line of inquiry (although curiously not Mahmood). Pritchard argues that Robert Orsi and I abnegate the responsibility of critique. Rather than contending with the crucial differences between religious people, she argues, the stance of openness to the other is in danger of becoming merely another liberal plea for tolerance in which real conflict is ignored or—even worse—a self-satisfied and self-satisfying exercise in intellectual masochism. Focusing her attention on my essay “Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Feminist Historiography,” collected here, and Orsi’s “Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study of Religion,” to which I refer in a note in that essay, Pritchard generalizes from quite specific cases. In the two essays, Orsi and I both ask questions about what it might mean to suspend judgment, at least temporarily, as part of an ethical mode of listening.

In his discussion of Appalachian snake handlers, Orsi may be subject to Pritchard’s first charge. He asks his readers to defer judgments about his subjects, even as they voice and enact virulent misogyny. Yet Orsi is a historian and he argues that the historian must bracket the phenomena to be studied in order to come to as rich an understanding of them as possible. Easy judgments, he contends, stand in the way of understanding. On this reading, Orsi does not claim that critique is impossible, but simply that it is not what historians do. (I raise questions about the possibility of maintaining that distinction in a number of essays, as does Orsi himself.) He also suggests, quite rightly, that any well-grounded critique must be premised on as rich an understanding of the phenomena in question as possible and that such understanding depends on a suspensive moment like that undertaken in good historical work. As to the second charge, my word choice in “Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography,” in which I urge scholars of religion to allow themselves to be “pierced” by the presumptions of those they study, is the subject of Pritchard’s criticism and the Christian resonances of self-sacrifice are, perhaps, a little too strong. Yet while “challenged” might have done the trick argumentatively, it doesn’t suffice affectively. The language of affect does not denote simply or primarily how I feel, as Pritchard seems to assume, but instead points to the complex interplay between how I affect those
whom I encounter, they affect me, and what happens in our interactions. I am not looking for some kind of self-sacrificial jouissance, but instead trying to find a way to hear those whose voices are often unheard or muted into naturalistic, reasoned—in recognizable modes of Western rationality—speech.

This cuts to the heart of Pritchard’s argument, for she insists that in “Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography” I renounce critique. (She is careful to note that the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, with whose work I engage in the essay, does maintain the necessity of critique even as he asks what it would mean to occupy the time of those for whom the gods are active in history.) This is inaccurate, but in an interesting and a telling way. I do maintain the necessity of critique in the ways in which Chakrabarty uses the term; for Chakrabarty critique is essential to emancipatory political projects. But I also ask—and at that point it appears very much in the form of a question—whether religious practice and discourse might themselves be sites from which critique emanates. Unlike Chakrabarty, who suggests that critique is the result of a particular historical moment, in his case rendered in explicitly Marxist terms, I ask whether critical challenges to the way things are and creative hope for how the world might be—all fundamental, on my view, to critique—might not come from religion itself.

For not all critique is secular, nor is it always grounded in secular accounts of what constitutes reason. My views on the topic became clearer to me a number of years ago, when I was invited by Saba Mahmood to participate in the symposium “Is Critique Secular?” My most immediate response was that it was a provocative—and a provocatively stupid—question.16 This is precisely why it is such a crucial one; hence also the importance of Pritchard’s essay. A lot of people will think the answer to the question—“Is critique secular?”—is obvious. Yet whether that obvious answer is “no” or “yes” depends entirely on who is answering the question and what they take the terms “critique” and “secular” to mean, as well as how they understand religion. Many within the academy, as I suspected when I first approached the question and as subsequent commentary demonstrates, find the question redundant, presuming that critique is defined in terms of its secularity and vice versa.17 For those who presume that critique is always the critique of something, that this something is associated with a putatively unquestioned authority, and that religion is, in its very nature, grounded in an unquestioned and unquestioning appeal to such an authority, critique and secularity are mutually interdependent phenomena.18 One might even push this a step further and suggest that, for those who would answer the question “Is critique secular?”
with an unqualified “yes,” the appeal to any authority other than reason is always, in some way, religious. From this perspective the transmutation of physical force into authority has been called theological or mystical, and hence has been seen as participating in an irrationality associated with religion.¹⁹

There are those, then, who insist that critique is antithetical to religion, given the putative rationality of the former and irrationality of the latter. To these secularist critics of religion I find myself asking how anyone can possibly look at Christianity—just to give an example close to home—and claim that its practitioners do not engage in critique.¹⁰ One can think very quickly of examples across the political spectrum, from the long history of Christian protest against war to Christian activism in pursuit of the repeal of *Rowe v. Wade*. And of course, there are Christians who embrace and make religious arguments for war and Christians who pursue the cause of women’s reproductive freedom.²¹ The diversity and complexity of Christian positions on any given topic render assumptions about what Christians, as a putative whole, think or do moot and my examples will seem painfully obvious to scholars of the tradition. Yet the lack of care with which many in the academy and beyond it discuss Christianity requires that the record be, continually, set straight. Moreover, a certain kind of secularist interlocutor might respond that the social, political, moral, and theoretical critique of authority leveled by Christians is always tendered either on grounds other than those specific to Christianity or on the unquestioned authority of Christianity itself. (Hence either with the help of a truly critical enterprise or, even worse, on uncritical grounds.) Yet the first assertion is false. Christians critique that which lies outside the domain of Christianity on the basis of specifically Christian claims all the time—this is precisely what bothers so many about Christianity in the contemporary United States.

To the second, one must ask what it means to talk about the authority of Christianity. The authority of the Bible, some might be tempted to reply. Yet there is not now nor has there ever been any agreement among Christians about what it means to speak of the authority of the Bible or even about what constitutes the Bible, to say nothing of what this contested entity tells Christians they ought to do or think (or even whether it does so and, if it does so, how). Some of the earliest Christian creedal formulations claim explicitly that the Bible is *not* the ultimate source of authority for Christians. (A number of other candidates are put forward, including the very formulae themselves—just the kind of putative circularity religion’s contemporary despisers love to exploit. Note that I am not making any claim here for the rationality of Christian belief, but simply
for its critical and self-critical capacities.) Every one of these issues has been and continues to be contested among those who call themselves Christians.

In other words, Christians continually critique Christianity and that which lies outside its boundaries. They constantly contest even what it means to be a Christian. And the same can be said for every other religion about which I know anything. It is difficult to see how a tradition could stay alive and vital without such contestation, however implicit and unremarked on it might be. As for the boundary between Christianity and the world, in the Latin West a distinction was made early on between the “city of God” and the “city of humanity,” but Augustine, who most famously argues the point, insists that the former can never fully be known as long as we are residents in the latter.22 For Augustine, the two can never be entirely disentangled in the present time (saeculum, the temporal realm, as opposed to the eternal, of which we only have obscure glimpses). What this means concretely is that Christians stand in a critical relationship to the temporal realm from the perspective of hope given in things as yet only dimly known, not from the standpoint of fully present and authoritative knowledge.23 (There are, of course, Christians who will disagree, who claim that there is a self-evident and inerrant source of Christian teaching and that they know exactly what it is and what it demands. Some of those about whom I write in the following essays stand among this group, although far fewer than one might suppose. Furthermore, I am not a Christian and so might be judged by some incompetent to participate in the debate. Yet the Christian tradition and contemporary Christian practice—which do not always align with what contemporary Christians say about what they do—bear out my view.)24

Yet despite all of the evidence to the contrary, the position persists, even within the study of religion, that religion is inherently uncritical, authoritarian, and ideological. This is the primary assumption of those who insist that the study of religion purify itself of all theological remnants and that it be rigorously social scientific or historical. In an extremely helpful intervention, Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism, Tyler Roberts makes the cogent point that these arguments depend on a notion of religion as locative.25 Roberts borrows the term from J. Z. Smith, who uses it to describe Mircea Eliade’s understanding of religion as “affirming and repeating the basic order of the world, firmly locating or placing people by repressing the creativity of chaos, denying change, and stressing ‘dwelling within a limited world.’ ”26 Yet Roberts points out that Smith also offers another account of religion, for Smith distinguishes between a locative vision of religion, like that he finds in Eliade,
and a utopian one. To cite Roberts once again, for Smith, “the second vision emphasizes rebellion against and freedom from established order. Smith calls it a ‘utopian’ vision of the world: where the locative vision focuses on place, the utopian affirms the value of being in no place. Both, he claims, are ‘coeval existential possibilities.’”27 According to Roberts, Smith’s second understanding of religion shifts across the essays collected in *Map Is Not Territory* from utopian to liminal. Roberts is most compelled by Smith’s account of religion as capable of engaging with disorder, incongruity, and excess; religion understood in this way, according to Roberts, “neither rejects one order for another nor revises an old order.” It is “neither locative or utopian” but instead “relativizes all order.”28 The utopian and the excessive, I think, are very closely related, for the utopian rejection of an old order of necessity relativizes all order and the relativization of order can itself be understood as utopian. But Roberts’s primary point—that religion operates in ways that are both locative and excessive—is enormously helpful in the context of contemporary debates in the study of religion.

Against those scholars of religion who assume that religion is always about order, stability, and authority, then, Roberts asks whether an overemphasis on “locative religion” has prevented us from pursuing more fully other questions: Can religious people play religiously? Can they recognize absurdity in and through their religious thought and practice and, if so, how? Do they always, necessarily, “speak” with transcendent and eternal authority when they speak of God or about their religious beliefs? Can they think critically when they think religiously? Finally, if so, where and how, exactly, do we draw the boundary between religion and the academic study of religion?29

My answer to these questions is obvious: of course religious people play religiously, recognize absurdity, and think critically while thinking religiously. The essays collected here show numerous examples of religious people doing precisely these things, all the while both claiming and subverting their own claims to transcendent and eternal authority in their talk about God. Roberts also uses the conception of religion as excessive, as unsettling boundaries, norms, and authorities, to show that locative accounts of religion are inadequate to their object and that forms of critique embraced by many locativists can be found among religious people, even theologians. (His favorite example here is Rowan Williams, who continually emphasizes the need for humility in claims about God
This is a vital contribution to the study of religion, for it enables scholars to articulate the different ways in which religious texts, practices, and communities work, and to see and name the vast array of sometimes discordant things that religions do.

I also agree with Roberts’s assertion that the study of religion can and should be not only descriptive, but also constructive. (This is not to say that every scholar of religion will bring together the various aspects of its study, but instead that constructive theological and philosophical work is properly part of the study of religion and cannot and should not be ejected from the conversation.) To this end, Roberts turns to the work of Hent de Vries, Eric Santner, and Stanley Cavell to think through what an “affirmative criticism” might entail. There are powerful accounts of responsibility, responsiveness, and gratitude in these pages, all of which speak to our work as scholars and to the broader question of how we might best live. The pages on Cavell and gratitude are particularly important, yet they are also the most distant from religion. Perhaps more crucially, Roberts embraces de Vries’s conception of philosophy itself as a form of “minimal theology,” a “restless wakefulness” and “infinite responsibility” in which thought is always in excess of itself. Although Roberts deploys Santner and Cavell in an attempt to overcome the seemingly hopeless and unending task of critique to which we are enjoined by de Vries, the resources for doing so come primarily from outside of religion. This leads to the unfortunate implication, surely not what Roberts intends, that the only religion useful to the secular critic is excessive and destabilizing. Religion as locative, as providing a space in which to live and to breath, has once again effectively been banished; it is here that I would like to press on and expand Roberts’s argument.

With Roberts, we seem to be far from those who insist that critique is, of necessity, secular, since for both de Vries and Roberts, religion, at its best, is critique. What de Vries and Roberts share with secular advocates of critique is an understanding of critique as always destabilizing and unsettling. De Vries, Roberts, and secular advocates of critique may dispute the role theology and religion play in critique, but they come from the same lineage of Western thought. The critics of Christianity most often cited as the source of contemporary Western philosophical conceptions of critique—Immanuel Kant, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche, among others—all understood Christianity itself as a vital source of the impulse toward critique. A presumption runs through parts of the modern European philosophical tradition that the self-critical nature of Christianity leads—or will lead—to the radical revision of Christianity or to
its dissolution (and, with it, the dissolution of all religion). (This final turn of the screw appears most explicitly in Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. John Locke and Immanuel Kant, for example, had no intention of dissolving Christianity, which both of them believed to be congruent with rational claims.) Embedded here are assertions of both the supremacy of Christianity (sometimes Judaism instead or as well) over all other religious traditions and an association of Christianity with the emergent secular realm, one in which rational argument is said to take the place of irrational faith. (In the terms provided by Augustine, then, Christian self-critique leads to the recognition that all we have is the temporal \( \text{saeclum} \); there is no eternal realm and it is irrational to believe that there is.) Christianity, according to this account, is both irrational and the ground out of which rationality emerges.

In one version of this argument, the secular looks a lot like liberal Protestant Christianity—sometimes shorn of its explicitly Christian trappings, sometimes not. Irrational, authoritarian, bad Christianity is then identified with Roman Catholicism and, often, the radical reformation. Since the early modern period, the battle has also been staged as one between irrational fanaticism (Catholics again are among the chief culprits) and rational belief. Yet regardless of the distinctions made—between rationality and fanaticism, paganism and true religion, Protestantism and Roman Catholicism—a paradox remains at the center of some of the most influential modern accounts of the dissolution of religion, for in Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud somehow the irrational begets the rational. On this account, critique is both secular and theological, for religion (or at least Christianity) gives rise to—even fuels—that which stands in opposition to it.33

Despite the desire that rational discourse be undertaken in a spirit of calm and order, modern Western rationality bears within it the marks of a purificatory fervor. (Roberts sees this clearly in his uneasy alliance with de Vries.) In its endless demands, critique is itself fanatical. From this standpoint, a certain implacability is visible even in Mahmood’s capacious account of what constitutes critique. Mahmood urges “an expansion of . . . normative understandings of critique.” Whereas on the old view criticism “is about successfully demolishing your opponent’s position and exposing the implausibility of her argument and its logical inconsistencies,” she argues that “critique . . . is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging with another’s worldview, that we might come to learn things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement. This requires that we occasionally
turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other.” Note here that critique as critique of something does not disappear, but instead is turned against one’s own presuppositions. I stand by my assertion that the move is essential to contemporary political and cultural criticism, and yet, from whence this relentlessness? Are there times when critique, understood as a form of intellectual, political, and ethical—dare I say religious—ascesis, is not enough?

Roberts, who follows de Vries in positing a theological and religious origin for the relentlessly destabilizing force of critique, turns to philosophy for remedy and respite. Within this context, religion is most compelling as critical and excessive, less so as locative; the two aspects of religion seem at odds with each other in ways Roberts does not fully explore. What I want to suggest here is that a different deployment of the concept of excess, one that draws directly on the work of the philosopher Jacques Derrida as well as on the Christian tradition, might help us think about the relationship between the locative and the critical aspects of religion in fresh ways. Religion might then be understood as providing rich resources with which to do the work of responsive criticism in which Roberts is interested.

For Roberts reading de Vries reading Derrida, “the religious exceeds the historical” in the very process of handing down, that is, of tradition itself:

One responds to the past, as tradition or heritage, in a repetition that, if it is to be responsible, is faithful to the past even as it exceeds and betrays it in a performance of singularity, an “event” of “irreducible prescriptivity.” Such testimony involves a complex performative, or a “perveraformative,” speech act that is both a following of or adhering to and a perversion of this past, a faithful interpretation and a singular invention.

There are at least two problems with this account in addition to the worry Roberts himself has with its purely negative conception of critique and responsibility. (Again this worry runs parallel to my own concern about the relentlessness of critique.) First, de Vries’s reading of Derrida is one-sided in much the same way that locativist readings of religion are one-sided, although what is emphasized and what is ignored differ. Whereas the locativist takes religion as solely upholding order, stability, and authority, de Vries finds religion of value only in its excessive, destabilizing, antiauthoritarian form. The move is premised on a reading of Derrida in which the claim that repetition always involves both sameness and
difference (this is the movement of what Derrida calls differance, in which spatial and temporal otherness is recognized as intrinsic to repetition itself) is understood as perversion and infidelity.

Yet in Derrida’s work from the 1960s, differance is not marked by perversion and infidelity—or if it is, it is a perversion and an infidelity that Derrida embraces. Across his corpus, moreover, he insists that tradition exists because of the human capacity to repeat, whether linguistic signs, visual images, or bodily practices. As I argue in “Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization,” included here, for Derrida repetition always entails both sameness (a practice must be sufficiently like other practices to be recognizable as the same practice) and different (the practice, to be repeated, occurs in a different time and place than other instances of its enactment). The difference internal to repetition both enables a tradition to be handed down and requires that it change, whether that change is recognized or not. Only if we believe that we can know the absolute origin of signification—a term I use here in its broadest possible sense to include practices and images as well as language—can we be said to betray a tradition and our responsibilities to it merely through the act of repetition itself. But Derrida argues forcefully that we can never know a pure origin; this is something about which a large part of the Christian tradition agrees with Derrida.

As Roberts notes in his use of Rowan Williams’s work, many if not most Christians insist we can never know God with fullness or surety. (For some we can never have this knowledge while living; for others, we will never have it; and for a very few, those, not surprisingly, most interesting to Derrida, it is possible that God Godself does not know God.) The unsaying of the names of God—what the sixth-century Syriac monk who goes under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite first called apophasis—marks the recognition that all human concepts and practices are inadequate to the divine. God is without limits and so escapes all our attempts to know God. Derrida spent a considerable amount of energy pointing to the similarities and emphasizing the differences between his work and that of apophasis. What is of most interest to me here, however, is that for Dionysius, as for the Christian tradition as a whole, apophasis always comes together with what Dionysius called cataphasis, the saying or naming of God. For Dionysius, cataphasis and apophasis are two moments in the movement toward God, two moments that together constitute Christianity. Until something has been ascribed of God, we cannot unsay it; without some conception of God’s goodness or being or love, we cannot move to the claim that God is beyond goodness or being or love, or that God is unbounded goodness or being.
or love, or that God’s goodness or being or love is so unlimited that we cannot think it within human conceptions of these attributes.

There is no “apophatic theology” within Christianity, then, but only the interplay between cataphasism and apophasis. Some emphasize one movement over the other. Some bury or forget the one movement in favor of the other. Yet when this happens, the liveness of the tradition—its very capacity to signify and to be handed down—is in danger. Arguably this is the problem with much academic theology at the moment, whether it be Christian or post-Christian, an ugly term that I take to mean secular philosophers and theologians deeply influenced by the Christian tradition, not unlike myself; too many insist that theology be solely cataphatic or solely apophatic. In the first instance, the tradition is idolized and becomes a dead and inert thing; in the second, all ties to a living tradition of practice and faith are lost and with them the vitality of human life within those traditions. (There are enormous problems with the very language of this claim, grounded as it is in the Christian dismissal of non-Christian religions as idolatrous and the refusal to recognize other religions as worshiping anything other than dead and inert things. One of the most crucial tasks before us now is to find language with which to name the liveness of a tradition and whatever the opposite of that liveness might be. The language most likely will not be new in some absolute sense, but handed down from traditions other than Christianity.)

Santner and Cavell, on Roberts’s reading, both point to the possibility of a secular theology or philosophy of religion in which we look to the everyday world and our critical engagements with it as the site of theological and existential meaning. As I suggested above, in many ways my own work is moving in just that direction. Yet because Roberts is intent on following out a certain kind of philosophical argument, he remains focused on abstractions; from whence do we receive the concrete traditions that enable us to live? Santner and Cavell turn to psychoanalysis, literature, and film as sites for reflection on how we might live; for many people, literature, music, film, television, and the visual arts are their tradition—and the source of its unsettling. Yet the resources of Christianity and Judaism, as of many other religions, are also available to us if we can find ways to keep them alive, even in—always necessarily in—beautifully altered forms.

This leads to my second worry about Roberts’s argument, which is that what is truly excessive within religion may be lost. (Above I posited this in terms of a question about whether naturalizing humanistic accounts of religion, like the one Roberts ultimately embraces, are adequate to their object.) One way to read my understanding of the cataphatic and the apophatic into Roberts’s work is to
argue that the cataphatic is locative and the apophatic excessive. In terms of Derrida’s understanding of signification, the cataphatic and the locative would be that which remains the same in the act of repetition, whereas the apophatic and the excessive would be the movement of difference. Yet I am uneasy with these analogies even as I make them. I am not at all sure that the cataphatic naming of God and of worlds is purely locative or the apophatic purely destabilizing, for the distinction between cataphasis and apophasis, unlike that between the locative and the excessive, does not depend on their opposition. Instead, the two work in relationship to each other; the one always requires the other. Put in Derridean terms, you cannot repeat without both sameness and difference. Hence the importance of Derrida’s neologism, différence, which entails both sameness and difference, naming and unnaming, fidelity and infidelity—or better, fidelity as infidelity. (Derrida’s inability or refusal to properly understand the interplay between the cataphatic and the apophatic fuels his own agonized relationship to Christianity in particular and religion in general.)

Derrida’s writing from at least the 1980s until his death, work in which he worries about singularity, rests on his recognition that what is released in the interplay between sameness and difference is irreducible to any particular instantiation of signification or to its general movement. Both history and philosophy, insofar as they are governed by the logic of the particular and the general (and hence of the generalizable), are inadequate to the experience of the gift, of givenness, of grace. Yet this does not mean that we can stop trying to name what we receive, what we value, and what we desire. We can never free ourselves from our debts, yet we can work to understand them and to live in the space of creative transformation that is the intertwined tasks of tradition and critique, of tradition as critique and as always irreducible to critique.

For the real and the true are not determined only through the process of critique as it has been understood within the modern West; finding and creating the real and the true, articulating when they converge and when they diverge, demand attention to the interplay between sameness and difference so vital to the handing down, acceptance, and rejection of tradition. To do this work we need to be willing to listen, to hear, and to try to understand what is; to articulate how what is and what was and what will be are always intertwined, even as our political and moral commitments may require us to disentangle them; and to recognize that there are aspects of human experience we will never fully capture, never fully understand, never fully name. (A different kind of thinker than I am might call this grace.) We always and inevitably receive what is handed
down, whether religious practices, philosophical texts, or *Double Indemnity* (my mother used to make me watch it with her when I was far too small to know what it was about). If we are very, very lucky—extraordinarily lucky—we are given worlds in which we can thrive. Yet our reception of tradition is always also a critical engagement with it, and it is that gap—the gap between what is handed down and what is received—that makes life possible and that makes possible the more robust and self-conscious forms of critique on which most of our lives and any livable future depend. Critique emerges as a self-conscious modality in those moments when we realize that we occupy the world differently—or desire to occupy the world differently—than at least some part of the traditions into which we have been born demand.45 (The multiplicity of tradition is also in play here, for there is always, of necessity, more than one way of being handed down, hence opening further the space to live differently and to live in critical relationship to the traditions that form us.)

The essays collected here all, in one way or another, touch on my preoccupation with the real, the true, and critique; they explore the ways in which we make real the worlds in which we live; they attempt to demonstrate the inescapably intertwined work of imagination and critique through which we create and discover the true. In the second panel of this triptych, I will return to Henry Adams and to the question of the real as it preoccupied him at the turn of the last century. Adams was a master critic, often overwhelmed by the annihilatory power of critical reason, which is fundamentally tied to melancholy. His work and life are full of crypts in which he attempts both to keep alive and to cover over a now-dead reality. After exploring the complexity of Henry Adams’s relationship to Christianity and to religion, in the triptych’s third panel I will argue that the emphasis on trauma as the site of the real at the turn of our century marks particular, often unspoken, assumptions about what is real and what is true. The late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century pursuit of the real, then, a pursuit in which Adams was one of the most vital players, can be seen reenacted in the late twentieth century in related yet new ways. Through the engagement with a medieval text that has been read in terms of hysteria and trauma, I will ask about the limitations of these contemporary preoccupations, posing the question of whether joy might also be a site of the real, as Adams hoped it might be. The question, then, is whether this is a joy we can recapture—or perhaps better, one that contemporary political and ethical concerns, including the politics of academic discourse, can allow or enable us to name, even to celebrate and explore.
This opening triptych lays out the issues of crucial concern across the volume. The second essay turns to a reflection on how God is made real in late medieval religious practice and in contemporary life, even as I suggest that the ability to make God real does not mean God is necessarily a human construction. (I return to these questions in part 4.) The essays in part 2 focus most explicitly on the historiographical issues around reality and truth, particularly as they are raised in the study of medieval women’s religious writings. My contention here and throughout the book is that these texts offer particularly useful sites for reflecting on reality, truth, and critique precisely because these issues are, in ways not often recognized, explicitly thematized within them.

Part 3 is also about the writing of history and the question of what is real, here with a focus on the issue of sexuality in medieval mystical and devotional texts. The historiographical questions that frame the essays and the very brief essay that stands between them focus less directly on the realness of the objects of religious experience than on the realness of experiences of desire, pleasure, and jouissance with and in those others. If we say that the experiences described or enacted in medieval texts are real, where do we locate that reality in relationship to sex, sexed and sexualized bodies, sexed and sexualized psyches, and perhaps—what this might mean is precisely the issue—sexed and sexualized souls? Finally the essays in part 4 are more theoretically and philosophically oriented attempts to think about what it means to say that bodily and spiritual practices constitute, at least in part, the complex worlds in which we live. I argue in these essays that ritualized practices are performative—that they make real that which they enact. Yet at the same time, I do not think that the performative force of ritualized practice can be taken as resolving ontological claims. Monastic and other forms of devotional practice in the Middle Ages are premised precisely on the view that God is ontologically distinct from and preexistent to humans and yet, at the same time, that God can be made palpable, experiential, present, even overwhelming—in a word, real—to those who engage in certain types of practice. These issues lead into the single essay in part 5, in which I lay out the history of allegorical readings of Luke 10:38–42, the story of Mary and Martha, as the prelude to a reading of Meister Eckhart’s decidedly novel engagement with the Lukan passage and the accepted forms of allegoresis that he inherited as a preacher, biblical commentator, and university-trained theologian. The question Eckhart poses, once again, is what it means for a reading or a set of religious claims or an experience to be real, what it means for them to be true, what it means to engage with the other that is history. It asks, finally, whether there are moments in which our
responsibility to history fades in the face of our responsibilities to one another, living, now.

Many of the questions I pose in these essays cannot be definitively answered, at least not by me. The relationships between them, the persistence of a line of questioning that is always a little ahead of itself, never entirely sure at what moment to retreat and when to press forward, only become visible when they are read together. At the same time, almost all were written within specific contexts, in response to particular scholarly conversations and intellectual demands. I think that the framework of each essay is vital to how they are read as a whole. They appear here with only the most pressing of corrections attended to and little substantive revision of my arguments. As is inevitably the case with work produced over a twenty-year period—and by someone as dogged as myself—some material is repeated across the essays, most notably key moments in the writing of and about Beatrice of Nazareth, Marguerite Porete, Margaret Ebner, and the contemporary historian Caroline Walker Bynum. I think the passages do different work in each of the essays, however, and will allow the repetitions to stand.

The essays presented here remain, of necessity, fragmented. I see them—individually and as a whole—as part of conversations in the study of religion, philosophy, theology, medieval studies, and feminist and queer studies. The work has a persistent eye on issues of sex, gender, and sexuality in ways that I hope will make it useful to feminist and queer scholars across a broad array of disciplines. I begin and end with texts central to the Christian mystical tradition. One of my ongoing goals is to bring these diverse, daring, and, often, dangerous texts into conversation with what, for lack of a better word, I will call the present.

Henry Adams, Clover Adams, and the Death of the Real

Shortly before his death in 1910, the artist John La Farge gave an interview with Gustav Kobbe of the *Evening Star* (Monday, January 17, 1910). He famously describes his friend and traveling companion, Henry Adams, commissioning the sculptor Augustus Saint Gaudens to make a Memorial for the grave of Adams’s late wife, Marian Hooper Adams, known by her family and friends as Clover. (See figure 0.1.)

In 1886, shortly after La Farge and Adams had returned from a trip to Japan, Adams approached Saint Gaudens. According to La Farge,
Mr. Adams described to him [Saint Gaudens] in a general way what he wanted, going, however, into no details, and really giving him no distinct clue, save the explanation that he wished the figure to symbolize “the acceptance, intellectually, of the inevitable.” Saint Gaudens immediately became interested, and made a gesture indicating the pose which Mr. Adams’ words had suggested in
his mind. “No,” said Mr. Adams, “the way that you’re doing that is a Penseroso.” Thereupon the sculptor made several other gestures until one of them struck Mr. Adams as corresponding with the idea. As good luck would have it, he would not wait for a woman model to be brought in and posed in accordance with the gesture indicated by the sculptor, so Saint Gaudens grabbed the Italian boy who was mixing clay, put him into the pose, and draped a blanket over him. That very blanket, it may be stated here, is on the statue, and forms the drapery of the figure. “Now that’s done,” said Mr. Adams, “the pose is settled. Go to La Farge about any original ideas of Kwannon. I don’t want to see the statue till it’s finished.”

Of course, Adams did intervene further, both at this meeting and subsequently. He asked on that day that Saint Gaudens consider not only Buddhist devotional art, but also photographs of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, in particular the mother of Jesse. (See figure 0.2.)

0.2 The mother of Jesse, depicted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Rome. Michelangelo, 1508–12. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.
Saint Gaudens’s notebook record of the meeting is suitably telegraphic: “Adams. Buhda. Mental Repose. Calm reflection in contrast with the violence or force in nature.” He added a sketch showing a seated figure posed facing front, with the legs slightly ajar. The word “reflect” appears again on the other side of the sketch.47 In 1891, Saint Gaudens’s sculpture, which he apparently liked to call “The Mystery of the Hereafter and the Peace of God That Passeth All Understanding,” was erected at Rock Creek Cemetery in what is now Northwest Washington, D.C., with an architectural setting designed by Stanford White. The bronze figure of a seated, hooded figure stands over six feet tall. Adams was in the South Seas, again with La Farge, but received favorable reports from friends. When he returned to Washington in February 1892, he immediately went to see it.

Although what is most often noted by scholars and guidebooks is the references to Buddhist images of Kannon (Japanese) or Guan Yin (Chinese), the female Buddha of Compassion, Adams’s immediate response on seeing the monument was to write that “Saint Gaudens is not the least Oriental and is not even familiar with Oriental conceptions.” He latter decided that this didn’t matter—“The whole meaning and feeling of the figure is its universality.” Yet as we have seen, Adams himself had pointed Saint Gaudens not only to Japanese images of Kannon, but also to medieval and Renaissance figures. La Farge seems to have taken Saint Gaudens to see an early sixteenth-century Kannon, given by the Orientalist Ernest Fenellosa to the Boston collector Charles Goddard Weld and on display at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts. (Although still owned by the museum, it is not currently on display.) (See figure 0.3.)

Saint Gaudens was also familiar with late medieval funerary sculpture, which resonates powerfully with the Adams Memorial, despite Henry Adams’s own desire that the statue not bring grief to mind. (He objected strenuously to those, among them Mark Twain, who so dubbed it the “Memorial.” Twain called it, simply, “Grief”). So Saint Gaudens’s image calls to mind the exquisite mourning figures (pleurant) made by Jean de la Huerta and Antoine le Moiturier for the tomb of John the Fearless (1371–1419), the second Duke of Burgandy, and his wife, Margaret of Bavaria, and the more widely seen, albeit less accomplished, figures from the tomb of Philippe Pot, Lord of La Roche-Pot. (See figures 0.4 and 0.5.) One cannot help but also see in the Memorial Michelangelo Madonnas: the Bruges Madonna of 1501–05; the late Medici Madonna of 1524–34; and, what again would no doubt arouse strenuous objections from Henry Adams, the Pietà of 1499. (The Adams Memorial resembles nothing more than the Pietà without Christ.) (See figures 0.6, 0.7, and 0.8.)
0.4 Mourners (Pleurant), from the Tomb of John the Fearless and Margaret of Bavaria. Jean de la Huerta and Antoine le Moiturier, 1443–1445. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France. Photo credit: Gianni Dagli Orti/Art Archive at Art Resource, N.Y.
0.6 *Madonna of Bruges*. Michelangelo, 1501–05. Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk, Bruges. Photo credit: akg-images.
0.8 Pietà. Michelangelo, 1499. Basilica of San Pietro, Vatican City.
Perhaps because Adams did not begin his systematic study of medieval art, particularly the Marian imagery of Chartres, until after Clover Adams’s death and the completion of the monument, many do not mention the medievalism of the memorial, even as they associate Henry’s medievalist turn in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* and *The Education of Henry Adams* with his intense mourning in the face of Clover’s seemingly senseless suicide. (Clover poisoned herself with potassium cyanide, a chemical she had on hand as a photographer. It is perhaps worth mentioning that *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* continually refers to photographs—and never to Clover. Nor does *The Education of Henry Adams*, in which Henry quietly passes over his years with her.) These late works are often read in isolation from Henry’s other writing and seen as marking a new turn in his thinking, away from the history of the United States from Jefferson to Madison, his commentaries on contemporary political life, and his novels. Yet the attraction to Buddhism and to Kannon or Guan Yin begins before Clover Adams’s death and in connection with Adams’s interest in diplomatic efforts in the Far East, and it is intimately related to his travels to the Far East and return to medieval Europe after her death. (He had, of course, taught medieval history at Harvard in the 1870s.)

One can better understand what Adams wanted from the Memorial when it is seen against the background of nineteenth-century American Christianity. Describing the Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia, like Rock Creek a privately owned enterprise, the historian of American religion Colleen McDannell points to the ubiquity not only of non-Christian symbols from Egypt, Greece, and Rome, but also of Christian symbols—the cross, the book, and the angel. As McDannell notes, “A popular marker for graves at Laurel Hill and other Victorian cemeteries was a statue of a robed woman draping her arm around a cross or mournfully leaning against it.” (See figure 0.9.) According to McDannell, the image is not biblical, but comes from the most popular Victorian hymn, found in hymnals in every Christian denomination (even a Catholic one)—“Rock of Ages.” From a medievalist’s perspective, the image is deeply biblical, as the hymn makes clear. Based on a poem by the Anglican priest Augustus Montague Toplady from 1776 and set to music in 1830 by Thomas Hasting, it is rife with biblical language and images:
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

While I draw this fleeting breath,
When my eyes shall close in death,
When I rise to worlds unknown,
And behold Thee on Thy throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.49

Henry Adams, as a student of medieval Christianity, would have recognized the tropes—if they can even be described as such. Bernard of Clairvaux in his sixty-first sermon on the Song of Songs comments on verse 2:14—“My dove in the clefts of the rock.” Bernard follows Cassiodorus and Gregory the Great in understanding the clefts in the rock as the wounds of Christ. “And quite correctly,” Bernard adds, “for Christ is the rock” (1 Cor 10:4).50 One could go on—certainly the image of the soul or the believer clinging to the cross is ubiquitous in the high and late Middle Ages, as in this devotional image, generated through a complex interweaving of biblical and extrabiblical sources, from around 1300.

But that is not really my point. My point is that this image—of a woman clinging to the cross, with its implicit feminization of Christianity and its promise of a familial immortality—stands in stark contrast to Saint Gaudens’s Memorial. Moreover, as I will show, the version of Christianity depicted in the hymn is precisely the one Henry Adams has his character, Esther, reject in the 1884 novel that bears her name. Again, McDannell is helpful here, aptly describing nineteenth-century American Protestant conceptions of the afterlife—found in
religious tracts, hymns, novels, funerary monuments, photographs, and a variety of other cultural forms—as a “continuation and perfection of what made this life good.” For the affluent nineteenth-century Protestants who populated cemeteries like that at Laurel Hill, Rock Creek, and Mount Auburn, this meant “love, family, friendship, work, progress, conversation—all these familiar earthly involvements continued in the next life.” The cemetery was a site of memorialization, but also one of pilgrimage, a pilgrimage on which the living came to see representations of their loved ones—or is it the loved ones themselves?—in the bucolic and familial space and place of the afterlife.

The natural setting of the Adams Memorial in Rock Creek Cemetery is very like that found in cemeteries throughout the nineteenth century, which were designed to evoke the beauties of the afterlife. Yet the Adams Memorial bears no name, there is no cross and no child, and little to evoke a familial afterlife. In discussing the memorial with Saint Gaudens and with friends, Henry disavows the peculiarly American conception of heaven. The pilgrims to Rock Creek—and there were many in the years following the Memorial’s erection—were not meant, Henry insists, to find meaning there.

Again, we see the full force of the forms of Christianity rejected by Henry Adams in *Esther*, written before the death of Clover’s father, her final depression, and her suicide. Henry’s novel was published without any publicity and under the pseudonym Frances Snow Compton. He explained to friends that he was interested in how a novel might make its way in the world without advertisement and without a famous name attached to it. Yet the uncanny resemblance between the title character and Clover Adams raises questions as to Henry’s true motives. Esther’s restless skepticism, her thwarted artistic ambitions, and her intense love of her father can all be seen in Clover Adams. Read in this way, the novel’s depiction of Esther’s overwhelming despair in the face of the death of a beloved father seems both uncanny and cruel. At the same time, it is through Esther’s despair that Henry Adams voices his own fear of submission to any creed, his rejection of Christianity, and his simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from alternative conceptions of the infinite. (Aspects of Henry can, of course, be seen in a number of the novel’s characters.)

*Esther* is an example of both a thwarted marriage plot and of the Victorian novel of doubt. Unlike other fictional and autobiographical protagonists within this literature, Esther never has faith; she struggles to attain it only because of her love for the clergyman, Stephen Hazard. (Hazard is a thinly veiled version of Henry Adams’s second cousin, Philips Brooks, rector of Boston’s Trinity
Church.) The novel depicts Esther at the moment she finds herself confronted with a Christianity that she cannot accept, a form of Christianity made, so the narrative tells us, as attractive and intellectually rigorous as possible by the intellectual, aesthetically sophisticated Hazard. Esther cannot reconcile herself to being a clergyman’s wife without sharing his faith. She listens to Hazard’s sermons, she reads theology, she questions him and all of those around her, but she cannot believe. In the closing pages of the novel, against the vivid background of the Niagara Falls, Esther and Hazard engage in the dispute that will end their relationship.58 Esther’s fear that she will give in to Hazard is likened to a suicidal leap into the abyss of the falls.

She sat some moments silent while he gazed into her face, and her eyes wandered out to the gloomy and cloud-covered cataract. She felt herself being swept over it. Whichever way she moved, she had to look down into the abyss and leap.

“Spare me!” she said at last. “Why should you drive and force me to take this leap? Are all men so tyrannical with women? You do not quarrel with a man because he cannot give his whole life.”

“I own it!” said Hazard warmly. “I am tyrannical! I want your whole life, and even more. I will be put off with nothing else. Didn’t you see that I can’t retreat. Put yourself in my place! Think how you would act if you loved me as I love you!”59

Hazard insists that in his love for Esther and his duty to the church, he must win both her love and her soul. “You are,” he insists, “trembling on the verge of what I think destruction. If I saw you tossing on the rapids yonder, at the edge of the fall, I could not be more eager to save you.”60 Yet for Esther, to submit to Hazard’s Christianity would itself entail a suicidal submission. “She fancied,” Adams writes, “that the thunders of the church were already rolling over her head, and that her mind was already slowly shutting itself up under the checks of its new surroundings.”61 Esther must save the self she simultaneously claims to despise. At the heart of Esther’s disbelief lies the doctrine of the resurrection.

“Do you really believe in the resurrection of the body?” she asked.

“Of course I do!” replied Hazard stiffly.

“To me it seems a shocking idea. I despise and loathe myself, and yet you thrust self at me from every corner of the church as though I loved and
admired it. All religion does nothing but pursue me with self even into the next world.”

It is not simply that Esther cannot believe in the resurrection of the body, but that the very idea of such a resurrection is horrible to her. She despises and loathes herself and so despises and loathes a Christianity whose highest aspiration is that the self should live eternally. Esther “can see nothing spiritual in the church. It is all personal and selfish.”

Hazard is appalled by Esther’s response, not because of its self-hatred, but because it implies that she hates those around her. He has, he tells her, heard all of the criticism leveled against Christianity. He believes that it hits on nothing vital. The one thing that is essential, the one point on which he cannot brook disagreement with Esther, regardless of their love for each other, is familial love and the desire for reunion it, for him at least, necessarily entails. “You say the idea of the resurrection is shocking to you. Can you, without feeling still more shocked, think of a future existence where you will not meet once more father or mother, husband or children? surely the natural instincts of your sex must save you from such a creed!” Women’s putatively natural instincts should, Hazard suggests, triumph over self-doubt; their love for others should lead them to desire the other’s eternal life; most crucially, Esther’s love for him should enable her not only to submit to him and his beliefs but to desire that they be true.

“Ah!” cried Esther, almost fiercely, and blushing crimson, as though Hazard this time had pierced the last restraint on her self control: “Why must the church always appeal to my weakness and never to my strength! I ask for spiritual life and you send me back to my flesh and blood as though I were a tigress you were sending back to her cubs. What is the use of appealing to my sex? the atheists at least show me respect enough not to do that!”

Esther refuses to be tied down by the expectations for her sex; she refuses what she sees as the reduction of women to the bodily and the familial. But even more, she refuses the conception of the human on which Hazard’s arguments rest. She wants the spirit, and the spirit—what she calls her strength—cannot thrive within the conceptions of resurrection and redemption that appeal to her love for other human beings.

Buddhism, at least as Henry understood it, lurks here, for Esther desires a spiritual life that is an escape from the confines not only of the flesh, but also of
the self. In his conversation with Saint Gaudens about the memorial for Clover, Henry insists that the statue evoke an acceptance of the inevitable, which is for him the essence of Buddhism. Neither joyful nor mourning, the statue, in its putative universality, is at peace. Again, Esther, written before Clover’s death, gives some indication of what Henry was looking for after that sad event. Esther’s first encounter with Niagara Falls does not evoke the fear of submission and submersion articulated in her final discussion with Hazard. Instead, for Esther, the Falls were a “tremendous, rushing, roaring companion, which thundered and smoked under her window as though she had tamed a tornado to play.” In a steady, frank, and sympathetic voice, it “rambled on with its story.”

She fell in love with the cataract and turned to it as a confidant, not because of its beauty and power, but because it seemed to tell her a story which she longed to understand. “I think I do understand it,” she said to herself as she looked out. “If he could only hear it as I do,” and of course “he” was Mr. Hazard; “how he would feel it!” She felt tears roll down her face as she listened to the voice of the waters and knew that they were telling her a different secret from any that Hazard could ever hear. “He will think it is the church talking!”

For Esther, the Falls are better than any sermon; they mock any sermon, as Esther herself mocks Hazard’s sermons throughout the novel. “When eternity, infinity and omnipotence seem to be laughing and dancing in one’s face,” how can one worry about love affairs or the paltry claims of Christianity?

The extent of Esther’s submission to the eternity, infinity, and omnipotence of the Falls becomes clear in a conversation she has with her cousin and friend, the paleontologist George Strong, just before her final encounter with Hazard. In her attempt to make sense of religion, she repeatedly asks Strong what he believes. (Strong is loosely based on Adams’s close and intensely idealized friend Clarence King.) He evades the question for much of the novel, not wanting to take it or Esther’s compunction about marrying Hazard too seriously. (Strong, in fact, tries not to take anything too seriously.) Finally, at the Falls, Strong makes a bid to be true to his own beliefs and to attempt to help Hazard’s cause. “There is evidence amounting to strong probability,” he tells Esther, “of the existence of two things,” namely “mind and matter.” This does not render belief in the future moot, Strong insists. “If our minds could get hold of one abstract truth,” he explains, “they would be immortal so far as that truth is concerned.” Strong argues that the only difference between his view and Hazard’s is that he does not
believe he has yet gotten hold of a single bit of truth, whereas Hazard insists the church contains it. As the historian Jackson Lears points out in his reading of *Esther*, the ensuing exchange is crucial. Esther asks,

“Does your idea mean that the next world is a sort of great reservoir of truth, and that what is true in us just pours into it like raindrops?”

“Well!” said he, alarmed and puzzled: “the figure is not perfectly correct, but the idea is a little of that kind.”

“After all I wonder whether that may not be what Niagara has been telling me!” said Esther, and she spoke with an outburst of energy that made Strong’s blood run cold.⁶⁹

As Lears notes, late Victorian Orientalist conceptions of Nirvana often use the image of a drop of water dissolved into an ocean to evoke the loss of the self into the all. (Earlier in the novel, Nirvana is evoked by the painter Wharton as paradise and eternal life, a state of peace attained after passion has been experienced and subdued.)⁷⁰ Lears argues that Henry rejects this view, a reading suggested by Strong’s repellant response to Esther’s energetic embrace of the idea of annihilation. Yet Esther, I think, remains true to this vision in her final confrontation with Hazard.

For the peace that follows her final meeting with Hazard is an ominous and terrible one. As Hazard leaves Esther, an awful silence descends: “It was peace, but the peace of despair.”⁷¹ Strong, meanwhile, has fallen in love:

“Esther, I meant it! you have fought your battle like a heroine. If you will marry me, I will admire and love you more than ever a woman was loved since the world began.”

Esther looked at him with an expression that would have been a smile if it had not been infinitely dreary and absent; then she said simply and finally:

“But George, I don’t love you. I love him.”

These, the closing lines of the book, point to the intractability of Esther’s dilemma and the inevitability of her despair, no matter how accepting it might appear to be. She loves Hazard, with fierceness and implacability, yet she refuses to be defined by that love, its “personal and selfish” nature. She cannot accept an account of reality in which human beings are reduced to personal relations.
She tells Hazard that she wants a religion that appeals to what is stronger, more spiritual, more pure than that. On one reading, we might see Esther as a figure for the rational subject. As with the scientist and intellectual Strong, on this reading, Esther’s rejection of Christianity is a principled refusal to discard reason for religion, the truth for fantasy, the reality of the abyss into which all humans will eventually fall from the dream of an eternal life in which the family is reborn. Having internalized her dead father’s rational skepticism, she refuses herself the comforts offered by Hazard. Peace, however full of despair, is the fruit of intellectual rigor and honesty.

Yet the argument between Esther and Hazard about the resurrection does not hinge on the rationality or irrationality of the belief; the issue is not whether or not the resurrection is real and its promise a truthful one, but rather whether it is a promise and a hope worthy of human beings. On this reading, Esther refuses to allow her love for a single human being to annul her desire for something more than her body and herself. Within the terms of the novel, Esther’s love for Hazard and her desire for something more are both real; she insists that both are true, but also that they are not both equally worthy of humanity at its strongest. Even as she refuses to allow her love of Hazard to sweep her away into the doctrine and practice of the church, she remains committed to the story Niagara Falls tells her. Hence the forbidding sense I have every time I read the novel that Esther will throw herself into the Falls, into an eternal, infinite, and omnipotent force worthy of the human spirit. (Is this the fear that makes Strong’s blood run cold?)

Of course, this doesn’t happen in the novel. Henry provides a picture of how Esther will live on, stoic in the face of her suffering, having come through passion to seek peace in the company of the infinite. It is Clover, Henry’s wife, who will die and it is surely a mistake to read her fate into the novel. Yet the ubiquity of the Falls and of Esther’s imagined—whether fearfully or energetically—submersion in them continues to feel like a prediction of Clover’s death. The ominously proleptic quality of the novel is rendered even sharper when we turn back to the moment when Hazard first fully elicits Esther’s love. During her father’s final illness, Hazard comes to offer help.

“I want to help you,” he said. “I am used to such scenes and you are not. You need help though you may not ask for it.”

She shook her head: “I am a miserable coward,” she said; “but we are beyond help now, and I must learn endurance.”
“You will over-tax your strength,” he urged. “Remember, there is no excitement so great as to stand for the first time in face of eternity, as you are doing.”

“I suppose it must be so,” she answered. “Everything seems unreal. I can’t realize my father’s illness. Your voice sounds far-off, as though you are calling to me out of the distance and darkness. I hardly know what you are saying, or why you are here. I never felt so before.”73

Henry seems again to predict Clover’s response to her father’s death. (Perhaps his experience of her earlier depressions gave him insight into what might occur.) For according to her sister Ellen, Clover’s “constant cry” in the summer following her father’s death, the summer leading up to her suicide, was, “Ellen I’m not real—oh make me real—You are all of you real!”74

This elicits an even more complex reading of the novel’s final scenes, for what Adams’s narrator calls “mysticism” provides the way to a new reality for Esther, one she discovers with Hazard but that will ultimately lead her to reject him. When the always skeptical but intensely loving William Dudley dies—like Clover’s father, a widower who had raised his daughter with keen attention—Esther is desolate. “At twenty-six to be alone, with no one to interpose as much as a shadow across her path, was a strange sensation; it made her dizzy, as though she were a solitary bird flying through mid-air, and as she looked ahead on her aerial path, could see no tie more human than that which bound her to Andromeda or Orion.”75 What follows is an acute description of the experience of mourning. To the “moral strain” of finding herself alone in the world, Henry writes,

was added the reaction from physical fatigue. For a week or two after her father’s death, Esther felt languid, weary and listless. She could not sleep. A voice, a bar of music, the sight of any thing unusual, affected her deeply. She could not get back to her regular interests. First came the funeral with its inevitable depression and fatigue; then came the days of vacancy, with no appetite for work and no chance for amusement. She took refuge in trifles, but the needle and scissors are terrible weapons for cutting out and trimming not so much women’s dresses as their thoughts. She had never been a reader, and perhaps for that reason her mind had all the more run into regions of fancy and imagination. She caught half an idea in the air, and tossed it for amusement. In these days of unrest, she tossed her ideas more rapidly than ever. Most women are more or less mystical by nature, and Esther had a vein of mysticism running through her practical mind.”76
In this mental and physical state, the only person outside of her family Esther sees is Hazard.

Hazard comes to the house daily, taking care of practical arrangements and “talking mysticism” with Esther. Unlike the artist Wharton, who during a similar crisis finds reality only in looking on at moments of extreme suffering and physical death,77 Esther “learned to look on the physical life, the daily repetition of breakfast and dinner, as the unreal part of existence.” “Her illusions were not serious; perhaps she had for this short instant a flash of truth, and by the light of her father’s deathbed, saw life as it is; but, while the mood lasted, nothing seemed real except the imagination, and nothing true but the spiritual.”78 The passage is difficult to decipher. Her “illusions” seem tied, paradoxically, to “a flash of truth” in which she “saw life as it is”—namely, as ending in death. On this reading the illusion seems not an illusion, but a flash of the truth. But perhaps the illusion is her subsequent sense that nothing “seemed real except the imagination, and nothing true but the spiritual.” Is the narrator telling us that death is the only true, the only real thing and that, in the face of this reality, Esther recoils, finding a false truth and reality in the illusions of the imagination and spirit? Regardless, Hazard revels in this side of Esther’s character: “His great eyes shone with the radiance of paradise, and his delicate thin features expressed beatitude, as he discussed with Esther the purity of the spirit, the victory of spirit over matter, and the peace of infinite love.”79 The lines are remarkably for the intensity of their focus on Hazard’s physical beauty, even as he purportedly rejoices in the spiritual ambitions he shares with Esther.

For the love into which Esther and Hazard fall is not purely spiritual, but also intensely physical. Death is not the only thing real about bodily life, despite the narrator’s protestations. As long as Hazard is physically present to her, within reach of her touch, Esther does not feel scruples about her lack of religion. But when she sits in the congregation of his church, listening to him preach his version of their mystical talk, she rebels. Going to the service, mixing with the crowd, itself irritates Esther. “By the time the creed was read, she could not honestly feel that she believed a word of it, or could force herself to say that she ever should believe it.”

With fading self-confidence she listened to the sermon. It was beautiful, simple, full of feeling and even of passion, but she felt that it was made for her, and she shrank before the thousand people who were thus let into the secret chambers of her heart. It treated of death and its mystery, covering ignorance
with a veil of religious hope, and ending with an invocation of infinite love so intense in feeling and expression that, beautiful as it was, Esther forgot its beauties in the fear that the next word would reveal her to the world. This sort of publicity was new to her, and threw her back on herself until religion was forgotten in the alarm. She became more jealous than ever. What business had these strangers with her love? Why should she share it with them?80

Esther’s intellectual critique, spiritual refusal, and physical repulsion are densely intertwined. She can’t accept Hazard’s beliefs on intellectual grounds; her deeply felt sense of the mystical or eternal, of the unreality of daily life in the face of the realness of the imagination and the spiritual, is offended by the materialism and egotism of Hazard’s conception of resurrection and paradise; and, most brutally and frankly, she does not want to share him physically or spiritually.

In the final confrontation between Hazard and Esther discussed above, I left out one crucial point. The narrator notes that when Hazard admits that he wants to save Esther’s soul as much as he wants to win her as his wife, his “speech was unlucky.” “She seemed to feel now,” the narrator continues, “what she had only vaguely suspected before, the restraint which would be put upon her the moment she should submit to his will.”81 Against the torrents of Niagara Falls, these constraints seem meant to check the unleashed power of Esther and Hazard’s passion for each other, both physical and spiritual. Hazard requires, demands, the safeguard of the church to keep his own and Esther’s passion in check. Esther can’t believe in the church, but more importantly, she doesn’t want to; her appeal to mysticism, to the Falls, and the narrator’s evocation of the intensity of her physical desire all, paradoxically, point in the same direction. Esther does not want what is excessive in her desire to be curtailed. She isn’t afraid of being subsumed by the spiritual or by the physical force of desire. What she cannot stand is the purportedly spiritual, but in fact intensely physical, constraints of the church and of its expectations about love between men and women putting a limit on her passion.

Henry Adams writes this character, in all of her recalcitrance, and yet the narrator seems uncomfortable with the excessiveness of her desire—both for things of the spirit, about which he overtly speaks, and for things of the body. Bodily desire is evoked by the powerful effect on Esther of Hazard’s physical presence—his glance, the sound of his voice, his touch; by the narrator’s descriptions, often through Esther’s eyes, of Hazard’s physical beauty; and, perhaps most keenly, through the imagery of the torrential Falls.
Lears argues that Henry Adams rejects the appeals to Buddhism and Nirvana found in *Esther* and in his other writings and perhaps this is right. It is difficult to say how we would know what is Adams, what the narrator, what Hazard, what Strong, what Esther. For Esther herself does not reject Nirvana as she hears it in the Falls. Late-Victorian conceptions of the pure spirituality of Buddhism are not all that is at stake, for Esther’s singular love for Hazard, in all of his physicality, and her desire to merge with the spirit are not at odds with each other. In the terms presented by the artist Wharton within the novel, one attains Nirvana only by living through physical passion and coming to accept its transience. Both *Esther* and the Adams Memorial are monuments to this melancholic peace, a peace always unsettled by the still living dead encrypted within it.

There are good reasons to accept Lears’s claims that Henry, after the completion of the monument, sought something more. For Henry lived on, grouchy and sardonic, vital and vitriolic, until his death at the age of ninety. His life and writing after Clover’s death might be understood as a ceaseless attempt—through travel, study, friends, work—to uncover, recapture, or create a reality not mired in melancholy. The desire to live on marks his return to the Middle Ages, his fascination with the South Seas and the Far East, and his attempt to find a reality beyond the mere brute force of the Dynamo. He wants to experience the joy and sensuality of life he ascribes to the South Sea Islanders, to the great old Norman landowners, to the saints and the mystics of the Christian Middle Ages. He seeks a return to innocence, yet continually enacts his own mourning at its passing. For all of this work is haunted by the specter of Clover’s death. The ubiquitous references to photography in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* continually recall her. The twenty years passed over in *The Education of Henry Adams* mark her grave as surely as the monument on which her name does not appear. Henry never names Clover in his published work and only rarely spoke of her or wrote about her in his letters, yet she lives on, encrypted within all that he did. Her physical presence—her physical absence—haunts him.

We will never know what led Clover to take her own life. But Henry fears the reality and finality of Clover’s death; he can’t let her go, but, like all good melancholics, he buries her inside of himself and inside of his work. Yet he also fears the excessiveness of the love she elicits in him. Henry simultaneously desires and fears the abyss of love toward which his character, Esther, ceaselessly strives, both spiritually and physically, for in that abyss life and death lie, forever intertwined. After Clover’s death, Henry listens for life, joy, and the real in the actual, yet the echoing cataracts of the fall, evoking beauty, movement, and eternity, always also
threaten death, a death and a finality of loss against which Henry continually, persistently, obdurately rebels.

In a letter to his friend Henry James, written some months after the death of James's brother William, Adams writes:

I did not write to you about your brother William, because I fancied that letters were a burden to you. The other reason is that I felt the loss myself rather too closely to talk about it. We all began together, and our lives have made more or less of a unity, which is, as far as I can see, about the only unity that American society in our time has shown. Nearly all are gone. Richardson and St. Gaudens, LeFarge, Alex Agassiz, Clarence King, John Hay, and at the last, your brother William; and with each, a limb of our own lives cut off. Exactly why we should be expected to talk about it, I don't know.82

As George Monteiro points out in his introduction to the collected letters of Henry Adams and Henry James, the importance of the friendship between the two men is signaled by one of the rare moments in which Henry mentions Clover after her death. In a letter to his close friend Elizabeth Cameron, written after Henry James himself had died, Adams explains the extent of his mourning: “Not only was he a friend of mine for more than forty years, but he also belonged to the circle of my wife’s set long before I knew him or her, and you know how I have clung to all that belonged to my wife.”83

James was the recipient of Adams’s “melancholy outpouring” on at least one other occasion in the final years of their lives. Adams’s letter does not survive, although it appears to have been a remonstrance over James’s Notes of a Son and Brother (1914), in which James writes of his life in Cambridge as a young man, precisely the time at which he first knew Clover and Henry. To Elizabeth Cameron, Adams writes,

I’ve read Henry James’ last bundle of memories which have reduced me to a dreary pulp. Why did we live? Was that all? Why was I not born in Central Africa and died young. Poor Henry James thinks it all real, I believe, and actually still lives in that dreamy, stuffy Newport and Cambridge, with papa James and Charles Norton—and me! Yet, why! It is a terrible dream, but not so weird as this here which is quite loony. Never mind!”84
Adams and James tended to disagree about their shared history, but in this instance, James’s response marks a present concern for Adams more than a desire to be right about the past. On March 21, 1914, writing from Cheyne Walk, James remonstrates with his “dear Henry”:

*I have your melancholy outpouring of the 7th, & I know not how to acknowledge it than by the full recognition of its unmitigated blackness. Of course we are lone survivors, of course the past that was our lives is at the bottom of an abyss—if the abyss has any bottom; of course too there’s no use talking unless one particularly wants to. But the purpose, almost, of my printed divagations was to show you that one can, strange to say, still want to—or at least can behave as if one did. Behold me therefore so behaving—& apparently capable of continuing to do so. I still find my consciousness interesting—under cultivation of the interest. Cultivate it with me, dear Henry—that’s what I hoped to make you do; to cultivate yours for all that it has in common with mine. Why mine yields as interest I don’t know that I can tell you, but I don’t challenge or quarrel with it—I encourage it with a ghastly grin. You see I still, in presence of life (or of what you deny to be such,) have reactions—as many as possible—& the book I sent you is a proof of them. It’s, I suppose, because I am that queer monster the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility. Hence the reactions—appearances, memories, many things go on playing upon it with consequences that I note & “enjoy” (grim word!) noting. It all takes doing—& I do. I believe I shall do yet again—it is still an act of life. But you perform them still yourself—& I don’t know what keeps me from calling your letter a charming one! There we are, & it’s a blessing that you understand—I admit indeed alone—your all-faithful

Henry James*

To live, for James, is to work, to cultivate interest in consciousness, in memory, and in the “presence of life.” James remains committed to the “act of life”—“It all takes doing—& I do”—and he calls to his friend, from across the abyss of their shared losses, to act with him. James does not say whether they will together find sadness, joy, or the two forever intermingled. But only through cultivation, he insists, can one live as long and as well as one is able.
The Unspeakability of Trauma, the Unspeakability of Joy

With characteristic perspicuity, in 1996 the art critic Hal Foster noted the ambiguities involved in the theoretical elevation of the category of trauma:

On the one hand, in art and theory, trauma discourse continues the poststructuralist critique of the subject by other means, for again, in a psychoanalytic register, there is no subject of trauma; the position is evacuated, and in this sense the critique of the subject is most radical here. On the other hand, in popular culture, trauma is treated as an event that guarantees the subject, and in this psychologistic register the subject, however disturbed, rushes back as witness, testifier, survivor. Here is indeed a traumatic subject, and it has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another: one can believe it, can identify with it, or not. In trauma discourse, then, the subject is evacuated and elevated at once. And in this way trauma discourse magically resolves two contradictory imperatives in culture today: deconstructive analysis and identity politics. This strange rebirth of the author, this paradoxical condition of absentee authority, is a significant turn in contemporary art, criticism, and cultural politics.86

The second of these two hands might seem the most self-evident and, despite persistent critique, it continues to shape politics in all of its forms. Although we know from the work of Allan Young, Ruth Leys, Didier Fassin, and Richard Rechtman, among many others, that trauma—and in particular the kinds of responses to traumatic events associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—has a history, we continue to operate with the broad ethical injunction articulated by work around the diagnosis from the 1980s and 1990s.87

The psychologist Judith Herman, in Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror (1992), insists that the first thing one must do in response to the violence suffered by another is to believe.88 To do so is to make the victim real, to make what happened to her true. Herman therefore conflates the real and the true in a way that draws out all of the promises and dangers of this position. Herman writes within a specific therapeutic and political context, but the injunction to believe operates much more broadly, from the political realm to the historical. With it comes the privileging of the survivor as the one who knows, the one who has access to the historical reality of violence in a way that demands political, ethical, and historiographical fidelity.
And this in turn leads to a tendency to read people from marginalized or under-represented groups as victims; increasingly, claims to epistemological privilege depend on the proximity to trauma and it is trauma, not justice, that makes ethical demands on others.89

There have been numerous challenges to the tenability of this stance, yet it endures. The accusations of satanic ritual abuse in the 1990s, for example, suggest just how dangerous the ethical injunction to believe might become.90 The debates around Binjamin Wilkomirski’s Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood (1995), however, highlight the continuing dynamic of a certain will to belief.91 When the journalist and historian Stefan Maechler demonstrates that Wilkomirski is, in fact, Bruno Dösseker (born Bruno Grosjean), Maechler does not argue that Wilkomirski made up his story of childhood trauma, that he wrote fiction, or that he lied. (For simplicity’s sake, I will here simply refer to him as Wilkomirski.) Instead, Maechler argues that there was something of Wilkomirski’s own putatively traumatic childhood visible in Fragments. Wilkomirski, Maechler argues, transmuted aspects of his own childhood into a fictional account of a child surviving the Holocaust. Maechler maintains that some aspect of Wilkomirski’s story is true, some part of it real; this is the traumatic core that cannot be questioned.

Yet why does Wilkomirski tell the story of his traumatic childhood as a Holocaust story? Maechler does not answer this question, but it leads to the other side of the paradox laid out by Foster. For at the heart of the diagnosis of PTSD lies the notion that one dissociates or represses the trauma—that in some real way, one does not experience it. Two seemingly very different accounts of trauma and how it affects memory are embedded in the terms “dissociation” and “repression.” For some, purportedly following the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, traumatic memories are repressed. The therapeutic claim is that through the process of free association these memories can be uncovered and reintegrated into one’s conscious memory. With this reclamation, the symptoms through which the repressed made itself known are dissolved. Others return to the work of the nineteenth-century French neurologist Pierre Janet to argue that traumatic memories are not repressed, but instead that during the experience of a horrifying event a person disassociates from himself. The goal of therapy is then to allow the event not only to be remembered—according to this model, the sufferer never really forgets the trauma he has undergone—but experienced as his own. This occurs, again, through its detailed recounting. Both those indebted to Freud and those who seemingly renounce him make use of his “talking cure.” (Janet himself made
use of hypnosis to resolve the symptoms of hysteria and related disorders, all of which were rooted, in some way, in the experience of traumatic events.) Both claim, although in different ways, that in some important manner the victim of a traumatic event does not experience that event, or, perhaps better, does not live that experience except through the process of therapy.91

All of this points to the complexity of the relationship between subjectivity, memory, and trauma. Maechler’s work on Wilkomirski depends on these contentious and complicated theories, even if only implicitly. The question that emerges is how one can ever adequately name one’s trauma if the events that engender it so overwhelm the subject as to render him or her unable to experience them? Is there something about the testimony of the survivor that makes it simultaneously (1) inadequate to its object—and for its subject—and (2) impossible, ethically, to disbelieve?91 Moreover, there is a tendency in the contemporary literature on trauma to assume that the more unspeakable the event, the more authoritative the witness and hence, the more inarticulate the witness, the more true that which she tries to tell us.

The historian Dominick LaCapra, in a series of important essays on the role of trauma theory and testimonial in the writing of history, points to an uncanny parallel between contemporary theoretical and historiographical discussions of trauma and what he calls “negative theology.” What worries LaCapra is what he describes as “an important tendency in modern culture and thought to convert trauma into the occasion for sublimity, to transvalue it into a test of the self or of the group and an entry into the extraordinary. In the sublime, the excess of trauma becomes an uncanny source of elation or ecstasy.”94 Clearly thinking of Georges Bataille’s essay “On Hiroshima,” LaCapra goes on to claim that even such events as the Holocaust or the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki “may become occasions of negative sublimity or displaced sacralization. They may also give rise to what may be termed founding traumas—traumas that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely catheterized basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity.”95

LaCapra recognizes the implicitly theological language that surrounds much contemporary discussion of trauma and uses it as the basis for a careful critique.

Some of the most powerful forms of modern art and writing, as well as some of the most compelling forms of criticism (including deconstruction), often seem to be traumatic writing or post-traumatic writing in closest proximity
to trauma. They may also involve the feeling of keeping faith with trauma in a manner that leads to a compulsive preoccupation with aporia, an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, and a resistance to working through. I think one is involved here in more or less secularized displacements of the sacred and its paradoxes. The hiddenness, death, or absence of a radically transcendent divinity or of absolute foundations makes of existence a fundamentally traumatic scene in which anxiety threatens to color, and perhaps confuse, all relations. One's relation to every other—instead of involving a tense, at times paradoxical, interaction of proximity and distance, solidarity and criticism, trust and wariness—may be figured on the model of one's anxiety ridden "relation without relation" to a radically transcendent (now perhaps recognized as absent) divinity who is totally other.96

In the absence of God, LaCapra asks, has secular art and criticism—and certain forms of secular politics—made trauma sacred? Have pain and violence and anxiety become the real, to the exclusion of all else? And what does that mean for how we listen to one another? For who we determine to be worth listening to? For what we can hear from them or deem worthy of our attention?

What I want to ask, finally, is whether returning to the Middle Ages, to the discourses of cataphatic and apophatic theology as they are articulated around the life stories of saintly women and men, helps us to understand our contemporary situation and to pose another possibility—the possibility that joy might also be the site of an unspeakable real. At the same time, I want to ask why we believe in the realness and the truth of the traumatic—its properly historical truth—but seem unable to hear joy. (Henry Adams could hear joy, but he could not find a way to make it real in the present.) What if the reality of trauma does not depend, necessarily, on the historical truth of the claims made about it? (This seems to me, in fact, to be self-evidently the case. I am not nearly as credulous a reader as the opening panel of this triptych might suggest. I just ask that we pause and think about what claims we are rejecting and why.) More importantly, what if the inarticulateness of joy also marks something real? How might that change the way in which we write the history of religion and understand it in our midst? And how might it offer new ways to think about the movement from the real to the true, or the varieties of ways in which truth might manifest itself?

I am going to use an extreme example, a story I assume that very few modern readers will believe; yet it is a story that some interpret in terms of hysteria, a disorder itself rooted in some kind of unnamed, unspoken trauma.97
Most importantly, in many readings of this story, a woman’s suffering is understood to be real, even if the events recorded about that suffering are taken as hyperbolic. I will turn, then, to the *Life of Christina the Astonishing*, written by Thomas of Cantimpré in the years shortly after her death. (She died in 1224; the life is written in 1232.)

(A note on hagiography, a term that was initially used to name holy writing—that is, scripture—but that in the nineteenth century was narrowed to refer to a particular kind of holy writing, namely, the lives of the saints. Many scholars would argue that hagiography is precisely *not* history and that the stories told within it are not meant to be read in the ways that we read historical and protohistorical documents. What matters, so it is said, is the holiness of the person in question and that holiness is one shared by all of the saints; hence you can move material from one hagiography to another without concern for misrepresentation, for all saints participate in the singular life of sanctity. Yet despite such claims, historians continue to read hagiographical sources for historical material, either about what was considered holy in a particular time and place or as telling us something about the person under discussion once we cut out all of the supernatural, generic, and typological material. This is a dubious enterprise, but one that is particular rife in the study of material on women from the high and latter Middle Ages, a time when we have hagiographies written in close proximity to the death of their subject and often with explicit claims to direct or indirect knowledge of the subject. We will see in what follows how this plays out in the *Life of Christina the Astonishing*.)98

It needs to be repeated: the *Life of Christina the Astonishing* reads like science fiction. It is very hard to believe that anyone ever believed it, to the point that I have at times wondered if it is not fictional—and known to be fictional by its first audiences. The author, Thomas of Cantimpré, knows people are going to find it hard to believe. He himself, moreover, does not claim to have known Christina. He tells us that he would not even have written the life if another priest, the widely known and respected James of Vitry (1160/70–1240),99 had not already mentioned Christina (without naming her), in the prologue to his life of the beguine Marie of Oignies.

Thomas opens the *Life of Christina the Astonishing* with these lines from James’s *Life of Marie of Oignies*:

I saw another in whom God worked so wondrously that after she had lain dead for a long time—but before her body was buried in the ground—her soul
returned to her body and she lived again. She obtained from the Lord that she would endure purgatory, living in this world in her body. It was for this reason that she was afflicted for a long time by the Lord, so that sometimes she rolled herself in the fire, and sometimes in the winter she remained for lengthy periods in icy water and at other times she was driven to enter the tombs of the dead. But after she had performed penance in so many ways, she lived in peace and merited grace from the Lord and many times, rapt in the spirit, she led the souls of the dead as far as purgatory, or through purgatory as far as the kingdom of heaven, without any harm to herself.

All of this might strike historians operating with the kind of naturalistic and empirical assumptions I described in the first panel of this triptych as implying a certain credulity on James’s part, while at the same time being plausible as an account of what one woman and those around her believed about her experience. The very framing of the prologue to the *Life of Marie of Oignies* works to reinforce this reading, as it is addressed to Fulk, the bishop of Toulouse, to whom James describes having seen Christina and the other holy women of Liège about whom James writes. (This addressee also points to the specific religious framework within which the *Life* was written, for Fulk had been ousted from southern France by the Cathars and James writes the *Life of Marie*, at least in part, to contribute to the campaign against them.)

Thomas insists that he has not only this written testimony, but also many other eyewitness accounts of Christina’s deeds and of her words.

I have as many witnesses to most of the events I have described as there were rational persons living at the time in the town of Saint Trond. These things were not done in narrow corners but openly among the people. Nor has so much time elapsed that oblivion has swallowed up and buried these occurrences, for I wrote this *Life* not more than eight years after her death. I personally heard other things that no one could have known except Christina herself from people who swore they learned them from her own mouth.

Remember, this is a story about a woman who claims to have died and come back to life. So what do we do with the care with which Thomas notes the abundance of eyewitness accounts, including that of a bishop and future member of the Roman Curia? Thomas *knows* the story is unbelievable, yet he persists in telling it and does everything he can to vouch for its authority.
Should we suspend disbelief in order to attempt to find what is real and what true in the story? Like Henry Adams’s Esther Dudley, I do not believe that resurrection from the dead is likely, and increasingly I do not think it gets at what I most value. (I used to think that Christianity without the resurrection of the body was pointless. I still believe that something vital is at stake in the claim that human bodies—life itself—are of such value that we might want them to last eternally. Yet I now believe that there might be more illuminating and ethical ways to affirm that value.) More important than my disbelief, however, is that there are significant reasons not to assume that Thomas is making claims about historical reality and truth. First, as I mentioned before and will discuss further below, it is not at all clear that we should understand the Life as intended to be read historically. Secondly, as I argue in “Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer,” the kinds of somatic miracles found throughout the Life of Christina also appear in other hagiographies of medieval women (short of the resurrection), and yet there is ample evidence that women themselves, in their own writings, resisted the depiction of their sanctity in terms of bodily abjection.

Yet this is precisely the aspect of the Life to which some give the most credence. Historically minded readers tend to assume that Christina was in a coma from which she revived, leaving out the idea of resurrection so vital to the text. But that she suffered unspeakable pain, submitted herself to torture, and generally acted like an insane woman, this some very perspicacious readers accept. Why? What problems does this particular form of credulity raise in terms of modern strategies of reading medieval texts (and those from any other place and time)? And, finally, might there be unspeakable aspects of the Life of Christina that modern readers are less likely to hear or to understand in the way Thomas and his contemporaries might have? We see and hear suffering, abjection, and horror, but what about joy?

And yet, the Life of Christina begins with a death and a resurrection. Rather than working toward the miraculous, it begins with an event so wonderful as to test the credulity of the most faithful readers. The text also begins with a test of love, whose fruits it then recounts. According to Thomas, the strength of Christina’s desire for God leads to her death. Yet when she dies, her beloved immediately asks for a self-sacrifice through which others might be brought to him. We know this, Thomas writes, because this is what Christina herself told those she encountered when she returned to life. Thomas gives us a version of these words, a long discourse purportedly from the mouth of the newly arisen Christina.
First Christina tells of her death and of her anguish at seeing souls in torment. She is then led to the Lord, who says to her,

“Certainly, my dearest, you will be with me, but I now offer you two choices, either to remain with me now or to return to the body and suffer there the sufferings of an immortal soul in a mortal body without damage to it, and by these your sufferings to deliver all those souls on whom you had compassion in that place of purgatory, and by the example of your suffering and your way of life to convert living people to me and to turn aside from their sins, and after you have done all these things to return to me having accumulated for yourself a reward of such great profit.”

Christina’s love of God leads her to acquiesce to his request. She comes back to life during her funeral service and, after floating to the rafters of the church, she begins “to do those things for which she had been sent back by the Lord.” She thrusts herself into fiery ovens where bread is being baked, throws herself into roaring fires, jumps into cauldrons of boiling water, and immerses herself in the freezing waters of the local river for days at a time. All of these torments are experienced as excruciatingly painful—her howls, Thomas tells us, were terrible to hear. Yet her body remains unmarked by her self-torture. So sensitive and light that when praying she floats to the tops of trees or church steeples, unable to bear the stench of human beings and the weight of the earth, Christina’s body appears to be a resurrected body.

Not surprisingly, Thomas depicts Christina’s family and neighbors as distressed by her actions, thinking that she is mad. They misinterpret Christina’s behavior in ways Thomas anticipates his readers’ will. Her sisters and neighbors repeatedly capture and chain Christina down, attempting to curtail her self-harm; yet God takes care of her bodily needs (her virginal breasts drip sweet milk and later sweet oil to sustain her during imprisonment) and eventually restores her freedom. After having acted out her purgatorial suffering before crowds of people, she prays to God that her actions might become more moderate. They do so and she is accepted as a prophetic figure in the community.

As the historian Robert Sweetman shows, Thomas depicts Christina’s prophetic and preaching mission as effected through both her words and her actions. Most importantly, her dramatic bodily displays are themselves part of her preaching apostolate. Through the extremity of her suffering, Christina demonstrates to onlookers the effects of sin and the horrors of purgatorial
suffering; in this way she warns them not to continue in their sins and turns them toward repentance. There is a progression in Thomas’s account of Christina’s life: first she must prove her sanctity through bodily suffering and only then are her prophetic (and I would add mystical) powers accepted by the community. These prophetic powers first evince themselves, moreover, through her actions. Christina begs door to door for her food, yet anything she receives that had been obtained by its donor through sin is rejected by her body. Only later do we see her discussing events that occur at a distance or in the future and telling people of the fate of the dead and dying. At a time when women’s words were distrusted and their ability to preach, teach, and interpret scripture severely limited, Christina’s bodily actions give her a religious authority otherwise unavailable to her. Only after her dramatic suffering, bodily enacted, could she teach with words.

In a rich analysis of Thomas’s *Life of Christina*, the literary critic and historian Barbara Newman argues that there is good reason to understand Christina’s behavior in terms of hysteria. Like James of Vitry, Thomas describes Christina as engaging in a host of activities similar to those found in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century cases of hysteria: deathlike trances, levitations, extreme asceticism, self-exorcisms, screams, tears, and bodily contortions. In grief over the damnation of sinners, Thomas writes, Christina “wept and twisted herself and bent herself backwards and bent and re-bent her arms and fingers as if they were pliable and had no bones.” Another time she “cried out as if in childbirth and twisted her limbs and rolled about on the ground with great wailing.” There are strong parallels here with the photographs of hysterics taken at the Salpêtrière under the guidance of the nineteenth-century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–93), photographs in which a small number of hysterical women exhibit extreme bodily contortions and spasms. Hence, for Newman, it is not surprising that Christina is a figure of fear and consternation to the townspeople of St. Trond, who assume that she is mad or possessed by demons (as the Middle English version of the *Life* puts it).

Sweetman argues that Thomas depicts Christina’s postresurrection life as a long *exemplum* through which she instructs others and at the same time frees souls from purgatory through her suffering. She provides a theatrical depiction of purgatorial pain and of postresurrection bodily lightness and joy, thereby teaching through her deeds, as she will eventually come to preach through her words. For Newman this explanation of the *Life of Christina* remains insufficient; always mindful of the impossibility of ever fully uncovering the “real
Christina,” Newman still wants to understand the person behind the text, one whose extreme actions and bodily symptoms seem pathological to modern readers. She asserts that we need to ask why “Thomas of Cantimpré took the risk of representing the village lunatic as a saint.”

A number of questions emerge here, the first and most obvious of which is why we should assume the historical truth or accuracy of anything Thomas tells us in the *Life*. His claim to rely on secondhand eyewitness accounts and his appeal to the authority of James of Vitry might be read not as marks of historical veracity, but instead as devices through which Thomas creates the effect of reality, a verisimilitude against which the extraordinary nature of Christina’s life in death or death in life is all the more starkly apparent. The extravagance of Thomas’s claims may be understood as an indication of the vital theological truth on display in his story, one that for Thomas surely overrides any concern with historical veracity.

One can imagine the *Life of Christina the Astonishing* emerging out of two very different scenes. In the first, Thomas reads James of Vitry’s *Life of Marie of Oignies* and becomes curious about the unnamed woman who rose from the dead described in James “prologue.” He then hastens to learn everything he can about her, talking to those who knew her before her death and after her return from the dead. On this reading, the *Life of Christina* is a theologically rich rendering of the stories people told about Christina after her second death, organized and shaped by Thomas’s vision of Christian perfection. Newman reads the *Life* in this way and wants, as far as she can, to get to the woman lying behind Thomas’s version. But there is another possibility. (There are many possibilities, but these are the two that most interest me here.) What if Thomas read James’s *Life of Marie of Oignies* and saw in the unnamed woman of James’s prologue the seed of a story in which the reality of the holy women of Liège as Christ-like—even as other Christs—in their self-sacrifice, rapture, and devotion might be fully displayed? What if he expanded the story from James’s prologue to make the case that this woman, now named, pointedly, Christina, a female Christ, died and rose from the dead and in her resurrected state brought others to salvation—both those she releases from purgatory through her suffering and those she frees from sin through her example? This reading becomes even more persuasive given that Thomas borrows from the lives of the desert fathers and the virgin martyrs and the tortures to which they were subjected in filling out James’s story. We can never know which, if either, of these reconstructions of Thomas’s writing practice is right, but we need to recognize that both are possible.
Yet regardless of how we understand the historical veridicality of Thomas’s story, the second question raised by Newman’s argument is, what is at stake for modern historians in accepting nineteenth- and twentieth-century evaluations of Christina and other holy women as mentally ill and, in particular, as hysterical? The association of medieval women’s sanctity and the forms of mysticism most often found among women with hysteria runs throughout the modern literature on both phenomena. Charcot, so important in the modern medical study of hysteria for his insistence that hysteria is a disease of the nerves rather than a sign of moral degeneration, malingering, and laziness, first introduced the reading of mysticism as hysteria in *La foi qui guérit*, written shortly before his death. There he argues that Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Ávila were “undeniable hysterics” with the ability, nonetheless, to cure the ailment in others. Charcot remains puzzled by these curative skills. In another text, cowritten with Paul Richer, *Les démoniaques dans l’art* (1886), Charcot and Richer retroactively diagnose demonic possession as hysteria. The association of mysticism—particularly the visionary and somatic forms of mysticism most often associated with women—and hysteria was used throughout the early twentieth century (and beyond) to disparage and denigrate women’s experience and writing.

Simone de Beauvoir, for example, distinguishes between the mysticism of Saint Teresa, the product of “a sane, free consciousness” and that of her “lesser sisters.” Beauvoir interprets the mysticism of Angela of Foligno, Jean Guyon, and others as a form of erotomania and hysteria (the two are often indistinguishable in the literature), with hysteria understood in a broadly Freudian sense. The hysteretic, for Freud, is one who suffers bodily symptoms he or she does not know how to interpret. These symptoms mark the return of desires that, due to the force of repression, can appear only in veiled form (and so are not immediately legible). (They are as such also experienced traumatically.) Thus for Beauvoir, whereas Teresa controls her bodily, sexualized experiences of the divine (a claim Teresa would find surprising), the bodies of other women signify without their conscious consent and without their knowledge of the bodies’ meanings (a sign of degradation for Beauvoir).

Beauvoir’s feminist analysis leaves room for a distinction between hysteria and mysticism even as she assimilates most examples of female mysticism to the former, degraded category. Most scholars who have wanted to understand mysticism with some sympathy have, as a result, either avoided the term “hysteria” entirely or reserved it for those figures seen as somehow marginal, excessive, or troubling. (My tendency has been to distinguish mysticism from hagiography, in
which, before the fourteenth century, most of the hysterical symptoms occur and then to read the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts as autohagiographical. This is a start, I now think, but not sufficient.) Not surprisingly, then, the term has recently reemerged around women who display a particularly somatic mysticism, namely, Christina and Margery Kempe. Although, as Newman shows, other saints’ lives produced in Belgium and the Low Countries during the thirteenth century contain accounts of divine possession that differ only in degree from that ascribed to Christina, in reading all of these texts it is vital to mark that possession is ascribed to these women by male hagiographers.

For the moment, let’s follow Newman in her assumption that there is a woman behind Thomas’s Christina about whose experience we can make at least some educated guesses. Let’s assume, moreover, that her behavior was read as somehow pathological by those around her—as is clear in Thomas’s text. Newman hypothesizes that Christina, having survived a unknown illness and deathlike coma, shows signs of severe mental disturbance: “antisocial behavior, violent self-mutilation, peculiar and repellent choices in food and dress.” The people of St. Trond, judging her to be ill, attempt to restrain her, make her a public spectacle, and have her exorcized, all to no avail. She remains an unassimilable mad woman, reduced to begging to stay alive (an act which, according to Newman, at that point would have had no religious significance for Christina or her neighbors).

“Into this wretched existence,” Newman continues,

came a cleric. . . . Seeing Christina’s extravagant suffering, he assimilated them to the mortifications offered by women like Marie of Oignies for the benefit of souls and devised a new interpretation of her state. Christina was indeed tormented—but her torments now had meaning: she was a madwoman with a mission. . . . Under the tutelage of this priest and his circle, Christina became increasingly pious and began to model her behavior, insofar as she could control it, on the devotions of lay *mulieres sanctae*.

Thus by a “stroke of pastoral genius,” the bodily pathologies of a hysterical woman are transformed into a theologically coherent glimpse of the next world. Newman thus argues that the theological value of Christina’s hysterical experience is read into it by a male advisor; only then does it take on religious significance and hence become something other than hysteria.

As I mentioned above, despite their extremity, Christina’s actions, like those of the other woman discussed in James of Vitry’s prologue, conform to
thirteenth-century understandings of religious experience. As Dyan Elliott shows, thirteenth-century philosophers like Alexander of Hales (d. 1245), William of Auvergne (d. 1249), and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) frequently use the terms “rapture,” “ecstasy,” and “alienation” or “departure of the mind” (alienatio mentis or excessus mentis) “to connote the alienation from the senses that occurs during an encounter with a higher spirit.” Debate about the nature of such experiences focused on Paul’s description of being caught up into the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2–4). Following Augustine’s distinction between corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual vision, most scholars agreed that Paul describes an unmediated experience of intellectual vision, one that does not depend on images. The general belief was that such intellectual vision, and even the lesser experience of spiritual vision, depended on an alienation from the body and from the sensitive faculty of the soul (the senses), if not from the vegetative faculty (the animating principle itself). (In the thirteenth century, these monastic ideas come together with the medical discourse on the physical effects of lovesickness, as I show in “‘That Glorious Slit,’” included here.) Alienation of the mind or the senses, then, gives rise to trance states and a deathlike bodily appearance. As Bernard McGinn points out, James of Vitry’s Life of Marie of Oignies is the first text to use language traditionally associated with the heights of monastic contemplation (separatus a corpore, a sensibilibus abstracta, in excessu rapta) for these trance-like states. Whereas earlier monastic literature (by Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux, for example) emphasized the brevity of this moment, James depicts Marie and other women remaining in trance-like states for hours, even days, on end.

In the thirteenth-century philosophical, medical, and theological literature, moreover, women’s bodies were seen as particularly suited to such rapture in that they were judged to be more porous, permeable, and weak than men’s. In addition, the great humidity and softness of women’s bodies were taken as making them more impressionable and so more imaginative. Although often a source of problems for women, this imaginative capacity could also make them more open to spiritual vision. However, hysteria or suffocation of the womb was also known to medieval thinkers as a pathological condition almost indistinguishable from rapture or demonic possession. It was widely believed that “the absence of sex permits corrupted humours to build up so that the womb actually rises and presses against the heart,” giving rise to a death-like appearance. Even Thomas of Cantimpré recognizes that death-like trances might be the sign of bodily illness rather than rapture. (And for Thomas’s English translator, as for many others, demonic possession becomes another possibility almost completely
indistinguishable, at least externally, from divine rapture or ecstasy.) Therefore, theologians and spiritual advisors needed to be adept at interpreting the bodily and spiritual signs in order to determine if they were caused by rapture, demonic possession, or simply disease.

Newman’s recuperation of the category of hysteria to discuss demonic possession and at least some examples of mystical experience—whether real, fictional, or some heady and uncanny mix of the two—raises, then, the crucial question of who is authorized to interpret bodily phenomena. One of the commentators on pseudo-Albert the Great’s *De secretis mulierum* (Women’s Secrets) shows that conflicts of interpretation were already at work in the medieval period. Women who suffer from “suffocation of the womb,” he writes,

lie down as if they were dead. Old women who have recovered from it say that it was caused by an ecstasy during which they were snatched out of their bodies and borne to heaven or to hell, but this is ridiculous. The illness happens from natural causes, however they think that they have been snatched out of their bodies because vapors rise to the brain. If these vapors are very thick and cloudy, it appears to them that they are in hell and they see black demons; if the vapors are light, it seems to them that they are in heaven and that they see God and his angels shining brightly.128

Here we see a case where women offer theological interpretations of their “hysteria” (note the proximity and the gap between medieval and modern usages) that are rejected by male authorities. The obvious question with regard to Newman’s reading of the *Life of Christina* is why we should suppose, given the absence of any account of such a mediating influence, that Christina herself did not interpret her experience theologically—or that she was not depicted as doing so by Thomas.

But, of course, Thomas *does* depict Christina as interpreting her own experience.129 In the first chapter of the *Life*, in fact, Thomas describes Christina giving her own account of what occurred to her, one starkly reminiscent of the kinds of reports Albert describes.

As soon as I died, angels of God, the ministers of light, received my soul and led me into a dark and terrible spot which was filled with the souls of human beings. The torments that I saw in that place were so many and so cruel that no tongue is adequate to tell of them. There I saw many dead men whom I
had previously known in the flesh. Having not a little compassion on those wretched souls, I asked them what place this was. I thought it was hell, but my guides said to me, “This place is purgatory and it is here that repentant sinners atone for the sins they committed while they were alive.” They then led me to the torments of hell and there also I recognized some people whom I had known while I was alive.

After these events, I was carried into paradise, to the throne of the Divine Majesty.10

So while a woman like Christina may have needed male clerical approbation to sanction her interpretation, there is no evidence within either the Life of Marie of Oignies or the Life of Christina to suggest that Christina—whether a real woman or a character in an extended theological exemplum—did not develop this interpretation of her experience on her own. (The only possible influences depicted are the nuns of St. Catherine’s outside of St. Trond and the recluse Ivetta of Huy, pointing to a very different narrative about women and theological community.)

Newman’s reading appears to rest on assumptions like those of Freud and Beauvoir—what is most salient about hysteria is less its symptomology than the victim’s lack of consciousness with regard to the cause of her symptoms. To label Christina (and the demoniacs whom Newman also analyzes in her essay) as hysterical seems to presume that she has no available interpretative frame for her experience. When one is provided by a priest, Newman argues, hysteria takes on meaning, becomes theologized, and is transformed into a profound religious experience. Newman’s hysteric, then, is one who cannot read her symptoms or, as the author of Women’s Secrets shows, who interprets them incorrectly. Yet available evidence contradicts Newman’s thesis, suggesting that women both desired and were able to interpret their own symptoms, even if at times in the face of male resistance. Perhaps Thomas, in telling Christina’s story, is more true to the testimony of medieval women than Newman allows herself to be.

Beauvoir asks whether the mystic submits to bodily symptoms or controls them with a “sane, free consciousness”; for medieval women and men, however, this poses far too stark a contrast. Women like Christina presumably understood themselves as overpowered by an experience beyond their control (this is the way contemporary texts by women talk about such raptures), yet there is evidence that they struggled to maintain the authority to interpret that experience against the often competing claims of male medical and ecclesial authorities.
Most importantly for my purposes, these experiences are not only—and perhaps not even primarily—ones of suffering and pain. Newman very usefully demonstrates that the suffering and pain she associates with hysteria are not in and of themselves religiously significant; it is only when suffering is understood within a theological framework, when that suffering is understood to be salvific, that it is valorized. I make similar claims about the transmutation of mourning and trauma into theologically rich experiences of the *imitatio Christi* in my essay “Acute Melancholia.” What interests me is the way in which Newman and I focus on the traumatic, mournful, and violent aspects of our sources to the exclusion of other important features. Although Newman does not render explicit the link between trauma and hysteria, the two are inevitably connected once hysteria is no longer seen as a physiological or moral disorder. Trauma either engenders hysteria (the early Freud) or is itself experienced traumatically (arguably the later Freud.) And these traumas are often losses. We can take Newman’s argument a step further and hypothesize that Christina’s putative hysteria is a result of her mourning the death of her parents, suffering at the hands of cruel or indifferent family members, and undergoing near death and burial. (She might also be traumatized by the guilt concomitant with religious life in much of medieval Christianity.) On this reading, what is really real in the *Life of Christina the Astonishing* is Christina’s suffering and her victimization. So despite Newman’s desire to underline the theological nature of the *Life*, in searching for the woman behind it she ineluctably grounds her reading in the depth and reality of Christina's suffering. (I do something very similar in my reading of Beatrice of Nazareth and Margaret Ebner in “Acute Melancholia.”)

Yet in telling the story of Christina’s actions and her words, Thomas of Cantimpré does not just narrate suffering, screams, and lamentation. Christina also sings, jubilantly, in Latin. At other times, Thomas depicts a more wondrous and indescribable sound emerging from Christina’s body, a sounds whose source Christina and the women around her have little difficulty in naming, even if that source, like Christina’s song, remains in some fundamental way ineffable.

Now she was very familiar with the nuns of St Catherine’s outside the town of Saint Trond. Sometimes while she was sitting with them, she would speak of Christ and suddenly and unexpectedly she would be ravished in the spirit and her body would whirl around like a hoop in a children’s game. She whirled around with such extreme violence that the individual limbs of her body could not be distinguished. When she had whirled around for a long time in this
manner, it seemed as if she became weakened by the violence of the rolling and her limbs grew quiet. Then there sounded between her throat and her breast a wondrous harmony that no other mortal human being could understand, nor could it be imitated by any artificial instrument. That song of hers had only the pliancy and the tones of music. But the words of the melody, so to speak—if they could even be called words—sounded together incomprehensibly. No sound or breath came out of her mouth or nose during this time, but a harmony of the angelic voice resounded only from between her breast and throat.

While all this was happening, all her limbs were quiet and her eyes were closed as if she were sleeping. Then after a while, restored to herself somewhat, she rose up like one who was drunk—indeed she was drunk—and cried aloud, “Bring the nuns to me that together we might praise Jesus for the great liberality of his miracles.” Shortly thereafter the nuns of the convent came running from all sides (for they greatly rejoiced in Christina’s solace) and she began to sing the *Te Deum laudamus*. All the convent joined in as she finished her song. Afterwards, when she was fully restored to herself and learned from the others what she had done and how she had invited the community to praise Christ, she fled for shame and embarrassment, and if anyone forcibly detained her, she languished with a great sorrow and declared herself stupid and foolish.131

What is unspeakable here is not Christina’s suffering, but her joy.

Thomas depicts sounds coming from Christina’s body in a way that is rooted in the exuberance and order of song, although not reducible to it. As in John Cassian’s *Conferences*—required reading for medieval monastics—the individual moves through the corporate recitation or singing of the Psalms to a wordless exaltation, and then back to the measured voices of the community.132 Joy is engendered through practice—it is, to use Henry James’s word, cultivated—and yet remains a mystery. For the medieval monk or nun, canon or beguine, there is no contradiction between these assertions.133 Joy is both engendered through practice and given by divine grace; it is simultaneously recognizable and ineffable; it elevates Christina—she takes control of the woman around her, commanding them as only an abbess should do—and returns her to herself in all humility.

Why does Christina’s joyful, ineffable song escape modern ears? If the depth of the reality of trauma is articulated through its ineffability, can the same be true of joy? Might joy be as real as trauma, or at least potentially so? Or alternatively, should a certain suspicion about joy and its source cause us to question the trust
we place in those who claim to have undergone unspeakable trauma? Remember, I asked with regard to Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* why a reader as critical as Maechler presumes that Wilkomirski was traumatized, even as he shows that the story Wilkomirski tells about that trauma cannot be true. What lies in the gap between what Wilkomirski experienced and the story he tells about it? How do we move from one to the other? Precisely the same question runs through Newman’s reading of Thomas’s *Life of Christina*, with Newman assuming that a woman like Christina could not tell a plausible and meaningful story about her own trauma. Newman suggests that it required priestly intervention to overcome the gap between Christina’s trauma or hysteria and the story she tells about it. Does the priest Newman imagines intervening in Christina’s life serve as an analyst or therapist, helping the traumatized, hysterical woman better to understand—or learn to live with—her symptoms?

As I have argued, there is no priest in evidence in the *Life of Christina*, suggesting either that Christina, like Wilkomirski, forged her own story about her trauma or that Thomas, in elaborating on a vignette he finds in James’s *Life of Marie of Oignies*, chose to depict Christina as doing so. Newman as a reader of the *Life of Christina* and Maechler as a reader of Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* share certain assumptions about the plausibility of the stories these two traumatized subjects are depicted as telling about their suffering, its source, and its meaning. For Newman, Christina’s story is such a healing and powerful one that Newman doubts someone as deeply traumatized and hysterical as Christina could have articulated it on her own. The story is untrue, at least as history, but the trauma is real. Maechler even more clearly insists that the story Wilkomirski tells is a lie. Yet like Newman, Maechler insists that Wilkomirski’s trauma is real. The power of the cultural narrative within which Wilkomirski places his own traumatized childhood, Maechler suggests, renders it a readily available narrative through which to interpret his own experience. From Maechler’s perspective, it might seem self-evident that a woman like Christina would learn to understand her suffering through the most cultural salient narrative about trauma available in thirteenth-century Northern Europe. But again, in both cases, the reality of the trauma itself is never questioned.

The greatest divergence between the *Life of Christina* and *Fragment* lies in the absence of joy in the latter story. Wilkomirski’s story is one in which jubilation has no place. It is, after all, a story about the Holocaust. But do the historical facts Wilkomirski borrows in order to understand and convey his own putatively traumatized childhood render it impossible to ever hear joy—or to ever hear it as
anything other than a fantasy? Of course, the problem long precedes the particular historical events to which Wilkomirski helps himself in *Fragments*. For Henry Adams, joy seems a thing of the past. Yet he still tries to tell stories about it, at least in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*. In *Esther*, too, Adams’s titular character finds joy in spirituality and eroticism, even as Adams depicts a Christianity—and a secularism—that constrains the excess of these dual desires, and so destroys joy itself.

A minor character in *Esther*, the painter Wharton, provides a figure for our current situation. Like Esther after her father’s death, Wharton reaches a stage in his life when, untethered from human bonds of love and companionship, everything seems to him unreal. Esther turns at such a moment to the realm of the spirit, and to the bodily charms of Stephen Hazard. Wharton, much like the artists at the turn of the twenty-first century described by Hal Foster, finds the real only in suffering and death.

Nothing seemed real. What earned me my first success was an attempt I made to paint the strange figures and fancies which possessed me. I studied nothing but the most extravagant of subjects. For a time nothing could satisfy me but to draw from models at the moments of intense suffering and at the instant of death. Models of that kind do not offer themselves and are not to be bought. I made friends with surgeons and got myself admitted to one of the great hospitals. I happened to be there one day when a woman was brought in suffering from an overdose of arsenic. This was the kind of subject I wanted. She was fierce, splendid, a priestess of the oracle! Tortured by agony and clinging to it though it were a delight! The next day I came back to look for her: she was then exhausted and half dead. She was a superb model, and I took an interest in her.134

The woman becomes Wharton’s wife; in the wake of the destruction she wrecks in his life, he finds himself wanting to paint only “purity and repose,” yet they continually elude him. Are we, like Wharton, only capable of finding the real in “intense suffering and at the instant of death”? (Can we see in Wharton a harbinger of Georges Bataille, meditating on the photographic images of a man being tortured to death? And, of course, both inherit the tradition of Christian meditation on Christ’s Passion.) Are we no longer capable of telling stories in which the unspeakable is the site of jubilation rather than lamentation, of beautiful voiceless song rather than inarticulate screams, of a body spinning with delight rather than one twisted in agony?
The danger of Thomas’s *Life of Christina the Astonishing* and the story it tells about joy and suffering is that the one depends on the other. Like Christ who must die before he can, through his resurrection, promise eternal life, Christina must die before she can live as Christ. She bursts forth from the casket into which her family places her, disrupting the lines between the living and the dead, yet her new life is premised on the intensity of her suffering. The *Life* suggests ways, however, in which we might disentangle, if not life and death, then perhaps joy and suffering. Or perhaps better, the *Life* suggests a way in which we might come to deploy the processes of incorporation that mark the melancholic subject to engender a richer array of living, spontaneous affects. For Thomas depicts Christina participating in monastic prayer, the recitation or singing of the Psalms in the daily round of the Divine Office. Cassian, in describing the role of the recitation of the Psalms in a life devoted to Christian perfection, explains that the goal of the practice is to become so one with the Psalmist that his words come spontaneously to one’s lips. Spontaneity takes work; it is a cultivated habitus that engenders the full range of affect articulated within the Psalms themselves: fear, dread, shame, and sorrow, but also gratitude, joy, triumph, love, and ecstasy.

Through the recitation of the Psalms, Christians come to know and re-create themselves affectively in and through God. Yet the recitation of the Psalms, the movement through their seemingly endless proliferation of names for God, is the enacted site of both cataphasis and apophasis. God, self, and community are both said and unsaid through the multiplicity of the Psalms and the long tradition of Christian songs their recitation has engendered. There may be something inherently melancholic about the handing down of tradition—it always involves the internalization of a lost and idealized other, in this case the Psalmist, but also Christ as the referent and often the speaker of the Psalms, a lost other in the face of whom we will always be in some way lacking—yet tradition need not rest on the assertion that loss, suffering, and death alone are real. Christianity insists that it *not* be, but that presence, pleasure, and life are *also* real, that we live in the interplay between presence and absence, suffering and pleasure, life and death, sorrow and joy.

For too long, the injunction to critique has rested on unquestioned—uncritiqued—melancholic foundations. For Freud, the self-critical function comes into the psyche through melancholic incorporation. Today, I think, the internalized judging agency has become the sorrowing, suffering world.¹³⁵ Those of us living in privilege—and those living, often barely, without it—are unable to look away, unable to act, unable, in the fullest sense of the word, to live. Yet the energy
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for efficacious action comes not solely through melancholy, but also through joy, through a love of the world that, in love, demands change. What Christianity shows—what Henry James, putative bastion of the bourgeoisie, shows—is that this takes work, work on ourselves and work on the world, an unalienated labor in and through which we become who we are. Not suffering or joy, for we can’t have the one without the other; we can’t live well—we can’t live—on sorrow and anger and rage alone.
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Many thanks to Bob Davis, Ben Dunning, Constance Furey, Mark Jordan, and Stephanie Paulsell for their help with this piece. I also benefited greatly from discussing parts of the Adams material with Carolyn Dinshaw.

1. A dynamo is an electrical generator. In *The Education of Henry Adams*, Adams describes himself as fascinated by the display of dynamos at the Great Exposition held in Paris in 1900. On the one hand, unlike the Virgin, a dynamo extracts power from natural material; on the other, the method of extraction, devised by the human mind, remains both material and mysterious. See Henry Adams, *Novels, Mount Saint Michel, The Education* (New York: Library of America, 1983); and Christopher Perricone, “The Powers of Art: Reflections on ‘The Dynamo and the Virgin,’” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 5, no. 4 (1991): 256–75. References from *Esther, Mount Saint Michel*, and *The Education of Henry Adams* will be to this edition unless otherwise noted.

2. For more on the variety of ways in which something can be said to be true, see my essays “Acute Melancholia,” “Queering the Beguines,” and “Practice, Belief, and the Feminist Philosophy of Religion,” all included here. For the moment, I am focused on what many if not most Christians mean when they talk about the reality of their religious engagements and the truth of Christian claims, which are ineluctably tied to historical claims. On this see my “Reading as Self-Annihilation,” also collected here.

3. I discuss the issue further in the third part of this essay.


6. In “Reading as Self-Annihilation,” collected here, I ask a number of questions that are always in the back of my mind when thinking about critique. Key is the issue of the potential historical contingency of Western conceptions of critique in the face of the historical claims and historical dubiety of much of the Bible. Would the term “criticism” carry such destructive resonance in the Western academy if the Hebrew and Christian Bibles had been more “reliable” documents? To what extent does this unreliability depend on the peculiarly historical claims made by these documents and the traditions that arise from them? Or is it a feature of reason to attack, such that any document of faith would have been found wanting?

7. On Adams's view of history see the late historiographical essays, “The Tendency of History,” *A Letter to American Teachers of History*, and “The Rule of Phase Applied to History,” all of which are collected in Henry Adams, *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, introduction by Brooks Adams (New York: Macmillan, 1919). While many still share the first of Adams's assumptions, the second tends to fall out of sight in contemporary historical and historiographical work, although, as I will argue here, naturalism and empiricism are generally assumed by most historical work.

8. This is true, of course, not only for nineteenth-century American Catholics, but also for Protestant evangelicals and many others across the spectrum of Christianity and at its edges, in Spiritualism and related movements. Positing the childlike character of these forms of religion, as contrasted to the maturity of those ready for atheism,


10. My work here is deeply indebted to, but slightly diverges from, that of Robert Orsi. In a series of important essays Orsi argues for the necessity of an “abundant history” or “abundant empiricism” that is able to contend with the “real presence” of spirits, saints, gods, demons, and ancestors in the lives of religious people. Citing important work by the anthropologists Stanley Tambiah and Gananeth Obeyesekere and the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others, Orsi points to the necessity of finding “a vocabulary for the kinds of mental and bodily processes that go on among humans in the company of each other and of their gods and other special beings.” “But belief,” Orsi insists in another essay, “has nothing to do with it.” If, by belief, we mean the mere assent to a proposition, Orsi is certainly right. However, I would contend that belief means much more than this and that it is always in play in the kinds of religious experiences to which Orsi points. He goes on to explain that he is interested in thinking about how “the really real comes to be so” and in moving beyond the claim that an experience is real for the one who undergoes it to find “presence, existence, and power in space and time.” This leads him to ask how these presences become “as real as guns and stones and bread, and then how the real in turns acts as an agent for itself in history.” Part of what is at work here is the belief that one’s experience is not


14. See Robert Orsi, “Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study of Religion,” in *Between Heaven and Earth*, 177–204. Unlike most of Orsi’s work, this essay does not depend on his own engagements, historical and ethnographic, with religious communities, but is a critical engagement with the journalistic study of snake handling done by Dennis Covington. Orsi’s larger point is a methodological and ethical one.


16. For an extension of part of the discussion that took place that day, see Asad, Brown, Butler, and Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?* As the authors note, they do not try to answer the question directly.

17. For this assumption rendered explicit, see Wendy Brown, “Introduction,” in *Is Critique Secular?*, and Stathis Gourgouris, “Detranscendentalizing the Secular,” *Public Culture* 20, no. 3 (2008): 445. Saba Mahmood robustly argues against Gourgouris in “Is Critique Secular?: A Symposium at UC Berkeley,” *Public Culture* 20, no. 3 (2008): 450. The problem with Brown’s account, which does include the possibility that the notion of the secular might itself require critique, is that it identifies critique only with the philosophical deployment of the term in the tradition running from Kant to Marx and Critical Theory. As I suggest here and in a number of the essays included here, there is more to critique than this truncated, albeit essential, history. Although many argue that Kant introduced something essentially new with his argument that everything we take to be the case can and ought to be subjected to the critical faculty of reason and hence that tradition be granted no authority, I am interested in an alternative reading of Kant in which his recourse, especially in the moral and aesthetic philosophy, to storytelling, example, and analogy is exposed and the impossibility of the kind of radical critique he demands laid bare. This does not, I very much hope, put me in with neotraditionalists like Alasdair MacIntyre, for on my Derridean reading, tradition always involves both a passing down and change, even revolutionary change. To pretend that we can exist without that which is handed down—at the most fundamental level, the care by which an infant is kept alive and brought into a community—is to deny the conditions of life, and while any aspect of tradition may be subject to critique, we can’t live off critique alone. My thanks to R. Lanier Anderson and others at the Stanford Humanities Center for helping me articulate this point.

18. Hence in Brown’s account, Kant employed critique to limit reason’s claims and to ensure that a properly chastened reason, rather than religion, will be the source of authority in intellectual and moral pursuits. What this misses is that for Kant, even a properly chastened reason needs religion, although one that lies “within the boundaries of mere reason.” For Kant, religion’s authority depends on reason’s claims, yet the power to activate the will in the moral life depends, in obscure ways, on aesthetic and religious impulses. Hence the vexed role of enthusiasm across Kant’s corpus, a subject on which I am currently working. See Brown, “Introduction,” in *Is Critique Secular?*
Whether this is good, bad, or simply inevitable is the subject of heated debate. The provenance of the move in very different and politically diametrically opposed thinkers, Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, demonstrates this clearly. The bibliography on the topic is vast and growing, but for an introduction to some of the relevant issues, see Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religion in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006). The volume has the advantage of understanding that Carl Schmitt did not invent “political theology,” nor is his usage of the phrase really about theology; instead, Schmitt uses the term to describe the putatively hidden theological source of secular power.


For compelling examples of Christian and Jewish activism from the left, see Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). For Stout, however, it is essential that anyone participating in democracy be willing and able to make explicit their positions in terms available to all those operating within that democracy. My question is, who determines what constitutes reason? Who determines the terms in which participation, reason, or explicitness are understood? See also Stout’s important book, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).


From this perspective, the robust self-confidence of religion’s contemporary despisers might easily be taken for idolatrous fideism.


Roberts brilliantly takes on scholars as diverse—although united on the point of religion’s locative nature—as Donald Wiebe, Ivan Strenski, Russell McCutcheon, and Bruce Lincoln. See Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 36–82.


Ibid., 41.


Ibid., 158, 161.

Ibid., 168.
33. A number of secularist critics of religion—some of those with the biggest audiences, like Daniel Dennett or Katha Pollitt, but also those internal to religious studies like Russell McCutcheon—want to bypass this entire historical narrative, both in terms of the history of antireligious critique within the modern West and in terms of the role of religion itself within that critique. For these critics there are scientific grounds for rejecting religious belief, and modern scientific reasoning owes nothing to Western—or any other—religion. Despite its ubiquity, this is an exceptionally hard argument to make. I cannot here demonstrate all of the difficulties involved, but merely point to the fact that for innumerable modern philosophers who argue against either fanaticism specifically or Christianity and religion more generally, Christianity plays a key role in the constitution of modern rationality.

34. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 36–37. Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s accounts of critique arguably lead to a position very close to Mahmood’s. At their most explicit, they both define critique, like the rationalist critics of religion I describe above, as the critique of authoritative traditions and norms. What they contest is the presumption that rationally based arguments or claims to authority can escape the dynamics of power. They go on, however, to suggest that critique is a virtue in ways that bring their arguments close to that of Mahmood. See Michel Foucault, “What Is Critique?,” in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext[e], 1997); and Judith Butler, “What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” in *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy*, ed. David Ingram (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002).

35. Roberts does include discussion of work that draws on the Christian theological tradition, including a generous reading of some of my own previous work. But when he turns toward the kind of responsive criticism in which he is interested, he names the project philosophical and rests his account on the work of de Vries (a philosopher of religion and theologian), Santner (a literary critic and theorist), and Cavell (a philosopher). The work on Santner and Cavell is compelling. My real problem with this part of the book, as I will show, is less with Roberts than with de Vries and the ways in which Roberts relies on and allows de Vries to ground his constructive philosophical project.


39. According to Roberts, for de Vries reading Derrida, responsibility demands a paradoxical “forgetting without forgetting,” which “is a function both of the particular, unique context in which it takes place (which is thus dependent on historical chains of ideas and circumstances) and of a response, by this speaker or this actor here and now, to the singularizing imperative of the absolute. It is a kind of crossing or pivot between absolute origin and history, autonomy and heteronomy.” Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 167. But of course, for Derrida there is no absolute origin and what is being described are two moments of singularity, two historical moments that are both irreducible to their historicity. This does not make them sites of radical autonomy or originarity, but instead always implicated in the general movement of the particular.


43. See, for example, Beliso-De Jesús’s discussion of “co-presences” in *Electric Santería*.


45. This is the space, then, out of which the possibility for critical engagement with systemic evil and injustice emerges. To know that we are being told lies and that the tradition (or a part of the tradition or one of the many traditions) in which we live is unjust requires a hold on the real that has also been, in some way, given to us. On my reading, this is the space in which the work of Judith Butler dwells. For my discussion of Butler, see “Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization,” included here. See also Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Butler, *Giving An Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); and Butler, “Afterword,” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen Armour and Susan St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 276–89.


These are the first, third, and fourth verses of the song as it appears on Timeless Truths Online Library, s.v., “Rock of Ages” by Augustus M. Toplady, http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Rock_of_Ages/.

For references and a discussion of the images, see my essay “‘That Glorious Slit,’” reprinted here.

McDannell, Material Christianity, 128. On the familially oriented form of Christianity rejected by Henry Adams, see also Lears, No Place of Grace.

Henry had the Memorial placed there presumably because Rock Creek Park was a favorite place for Henry and Clover to ride horseback. They went every day when they were in Washington.


It is almost as if Henry wished for his father-in-law’s death and hoped it would lead Clover to turn more fully to him. Yet as I will suggest, there are also indications in the novel that Adams feared the full force of a woman’s desire. For related comments, see Lears, No Place of Grace, 270–72.


58. By the late nineteenth century, Niagara Falls was already closely associated with both the religious and the romantic sublime. Harriet Beecher Stowe describes in a letter a visit to the Falls in 1834: “Let me tell you, if I can, what is unutterable. I did not once think whether it was high or low; whether it roared or didn’t roar; whether it equaled my expectations or not. My mind whirled off, it seemed to me, in a new, strange world. It seemed unearthly, like the strange, dim images in the Revelation. I thought of the great white throne; the rainbow around it; the throne in sight like unto an emerald; and oh! that beautiful water rising like moonlight, falling as the soul sinks when it dies, to rise refined, spiritualized, and pure; that rainbow, breaking out, trembling, fading, and again coming like a beautiful spirit walking the waters. Oh, it is lovelier than it is great; it is like the Mind that made it: great, but so veiled in beauty that we gaze without terror. I felt as if I could have gone over with the waters; it would be so beautiful a death; there would be no fear in it. I felt the rock tremble under me with a sort of joy. I was so maddened that I could have gone too, if it had gone.” Annie Fields, ed., *The Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), 89–90; cited by Brett Grainger, “The Vital Landscape: Evangelical Religious Practice and the Culture of Nature in America, 1790–1870” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2014), 152–53. See also Elizabeth R. McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Patrick McGreevey, *Imagining Niagara: The Meaning and Making of Niagara Falls* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).


60. Ibid., 331.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid., 333.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid. Although I don’t know if Henry Adams was aware of this, the tiger is associated with Guan Yin. In one story about her, a tiger takes her to a dark realm of suffering, which she turned into a paradise with her presence. In another, Guan Yin is said not to have died, but to have been transported to heaven by a tiger. An important story about the Buddha tells of his encounter with a hungry tigress, who is about to eat her young. The Buddha offers himself to be eaten to spare the tiger cubs. For an insightful analysis of this and other *Jataka* stories that entail the Buddha’s self-sacrifice, dismemberment, and death (also crucial features in the stories about Guan Yin), see Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Christianity is not the only religious tradition that expects bloody self-sacrifice on the part of its heroes.

Lears points to a third religious possibility in the novel, one that Henry does not fully explore but that is expressed by the artist, Wharton, commissioned to create the art for a new church where Hazard is minister. Disgusted with the merely decorative in art, Wharton wants to place a Madonna at the heart of the church. “The place has no heart,” Wharton insists, “To me religion is passion. To reach Heaven you must go through hell, and carry its marks on your face and figure.” This is also, it should be noted, what Wharton calls Nirvana. For Lears, religion as passion recurs in Henry’s *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres*, with the Virgin at its center. Yet although more sensual, passionate, and real, this conception of religion also threatens annihilation and so remains problematic for Adams. As I will suggest below, I think that sensual desire is also in evidence elsewhere in the novel. See Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 272, 288–97.


It was when untied from human connections, as Esther is after her father’s death, that Wharton describes a pathological experience of unreality not unlike that which overtakes Esther. Wharton came from nothing, but his talent was discovered and money collected to send him to Europe. As he tells Esther and her friend Catherine, “It was after I had been some years at work and had got already a little reputation among Americans, that I was at my worst. Nothing seemed real. What earned me my first success was an attempt I made to paint the strange figures and fancies which possessed me. I studied nothing but the most extravagant subjects. For a time nothing would satisfy me but to draw from models at moments of intense suffering and at the instant of death.” In pursuit of such subjects, he encounters a woman “suffering from an overdose of arsenic.” She was a splendid model, an actress disgusted with life, who survived her own suicide attempt. Wharton marries her and she comes close to destroying his life as well as her own. Only after living through this deathlike passion does Wharton begin to “adore purity and repose,” but his own experience renders it impossible for him to “get hold” of his ideal. Only innocence regained could enable it; yet only the experience of passion, destroyer of innocence, allows him to discover the ideal. See Adams, *Esther*, 251–52. I will discuss the passage further in the third part of this essay.
78. Ibid., 265.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid., 271–72. One can’t help but think here of Henry’s dislike for the idea that Clover’s photographs, often of intimate scenes with family and friends, be published. Following his wishes, they were not made public during either of their lifetimes.
81. Ibid., 331.
83. Cited in ibid., 32.
84. Cited in ibid., 89n2. Adams suffered a stroke in 1912 and in much of his correspondence after his recovery talks about “this queer mad world,” including in a letter to James from 1913. See ibid., 87.
85. Ibid., 88–89. The letter belies James’s own melancholia, although only someone so beset, I think, could write what James does here.


95. LaCapra, *Writing History*, 23.

96. Ibid., 23–24.

97. Much of the contemporary theoretical discourse and practice surrounding trauma or, more clinically in recent years, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has its origins in work done during the nineteenth century on hysteria. Although in the United States hysteria disappears as a clinical phenomenon, many—although certainly not all—of its symptoms appear under the new heading of PTSD. See Herman, *Trauma and Recover*; Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*; and John Fletcher, *Freud and the Scene of Trauma* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

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99. James of Vitry, author of the Life of Marie of Oignies, was an Augustinian canon from the Low Countries who went on to become bishop of Acre and a cardinal in the Roman Curia. Hence his authority had some weight for Thomas and for his audience.


104. Ibid., 131.


111. Thomas, of course, does not put it that way. For the reference, see Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit,” 765.

112. Ibid., 765.


114. For the parallels between the Life of Christina and those of the desert fathers and virgin martyrs, see Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit”; and Jennifer N. Brown, Three Women of Liège: A Critical Edition and Commentary on the Middle English Lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina Mirabilis and Marie d’Oignies (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).

115. On reading the mystic or the demoniac as hysteriac, see my discussions in Sensible Ecstasy, 244–47.


118. See for example, the debate between Oskar Pfister and Martin Grabmann with regard to Margaret Ebner. See Christina Mazzoni, Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 20–21; and Gertrud Jaron Lewis, By Women for Women About Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century German (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1996), 70. Nancy Partner argues for the viability of the category in explaining medieval


120. On an alternative reading of Margery Kempe as queer, see Carolyn Dinshaw, Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). I think that her queerness in part emerges from her insistence on her own interpretations of her experience, no matter how well they might accord with official scripts.

121. Female hagiographers may also have made this move as well, although the record here is scanty and complex. For discussion of the issues, see Sean L. Field, “Agnes of Harcourt, Felipa of Porcelet, and Marguerite d’Oingt: Women Writing About Women at the End of the Thirteenth Century,” Church History 76 (2007): 298–328.


123. For counterevidence concerning the religious importance of begging in the lives of the thirteenth-century holy women of Liège, see Amy Hollywood, The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).


129. In one of the few cases where we have letters between a woman and her spiritual advisor or collaborator, the beguine Christina of Stommeln tends to read her experiences as demonic attacks, whereas the Dominican Peter of Dacia provides the mystical reading. See McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 179; and John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). The text, then, supports the reading Newman gives of the *Life of Christina*, although I do not think it alone can serve as a justification for the reading.


132. For references and a preliminary discussion, see the essays by Douglas Burton-Cristie and Amy Hollywood in Hollywood and Beckman, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*.

133. A vital question for me now is how habitus and spontaneity, once so intimately entwined, became diametrically opposed to each other. For Cassian, monks must recite the Psalms until they come to the lips spontaneously; for most modern Protestant Christians, claims to spontaneity mark the refusal of ritual and habituation. How did this happen? How is it, in practice, continually undone? See Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2006); and Ted A. Smith, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


135. Of course, in many ways it was for Freud as well. The essential text is *Totem and Taboo*, for here Freud links the incorporation of the father’s prohibition in the dissolution of the Oedipus complex to the handing down of tradition from fathers to sons. Tradition is created, Freud speculates, when the sons kill the father, then recoil in a weirdly joyful grief in which they celebrate the father’s death, prohibit further killing of a totem associated with the father, and create the ceremonies that will be handed down to mark the founding of the community as a community tied together by tradition.

Freud gives a number of different accounts of how melancholic incorporation gives rise to critique. In melancholia, the subject does not want to accept the loss of an idealized other and so internalizes her. Most simply, critique emerges as a result of our ambivalent feelings toward the lost other—love, of course, but also rage at her departure. To this Freud adds the notion that it is the Oedipal father who is lost and internalized and so with it his injunctions against the son. But I wonder if, in addition, the critical agency might be an attempt by the psyche to distinguish the living from the dead. This would help explain the relentlessness of critique, for if the psyche is constituted through the internalization of lost (and so at least symbolically dead) others, as long as I live, they live. If they die, I die. Life depends on the impossibility of ever fully distinguishing the living from the dead.