5-9-2020

Origin of Doubts: The Victorian Quest for Proof and Radical Manifestations of Spirit

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The Other Victorians

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April 28, 2020

Prologue

Victorian culture is, in a word, iconic. Those who have come after the nineteenth century have sometimes insisted on a one-dimensional depiction of Victorians as wealthy and repressed. However, a sweeping definition of Victorian life can often lead to incorrect assumptions. One could assume that because of stereotypes about the Victorians, Christianity was a powerful and all-encompassing influence on the people of the time. Yet I discovered a rich and different facet of British history that contradicts this religious stereotype. Alternative and folk religions were massively popular in an era that witnessed what was deemed "a crisis in faith" (Helmstadter and Lightman 4). What I had uncovered led me to two main questions. In this crisis of faith, why were people leaving the Church of England? And how did alternative religions satiate people's metaphysical desires? In this paper I argue that the question of belief, for Victorians, became a question of proof.

The publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) introduced a new form of thinking that challenged conventional religious epistemology. Victorians lived in a pivotal moment of innovation, discovery, and debate. Charles Darwin's scientific discoveries in evolution were no exception. And in a time of increasing anxiety about change, people were searching for spiritual guidance outside of The Church of England. *On the Origin of Species* set fire to the kindling of questions that were beneath the surface of Victorian society: how can one feel confident in the existential messages of a church whose basis is the antithesis of proof?

Alternative religions, for the Victorians, presented a relationship to the divine or sacred which was much more intimate than that offered by organized religion. Spiritualism, in the broadest sense, argues that it is superior to organized religion and materialism because it relies not on faith, but on the evidence provided by the direct experience of practitioners (Franklin 32).

Two forms of alternative religions at the center of the British Victorian cultural imaginary were Natural Supernaturalism and Corporeal Spiritualism. The term Natural Supernaturalism was coined by Thomas Carlyle in 1834. Carlyle suggests that the supernatural manifests itself within nature. This could mean the supernatural shows itself through a vibrant setting sun or mountaintops cutting through moving clouds. Corporeal Spiritualism is an umbrella term that I have created to refer to rituals that use the body as a conduit for communication with the supernatural. An example of Corporeal Spiritualism would be a medium speaking to spirits. In both conceptions of the sacred, there is a key process of searching for and finding tangible evidence of a spirit.

Emily Brontë and Olive Schreiner both highlight existential ponderings of the time as well as practices of alternative religions in their respective novels *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). The characters of Waldo in *The Story of an African Farm* and Catherine Linton in *Wuthering Heights* share parallel crises in faith. The novels are structured around their spiritual development, from rejecting conventional Christianity to embracing alternative religions. Additionally, the secondary characters whom Waldo and Catherine encounter either highlight the inadequacy of organized religion, like Bonaparte Blenkins and Joseph, or emphasize the power of alternative spirituality, like Lockwood and Heathcliff. Themes of nature, the divine, and the supernatural blend together to portray Waldo's and Catherine's tumultuous journeys. Brontë and Schreiner artfully weave science and religion into their narratives as a way to sympathize with readers of the time who were similarly struggling with their faith.

Skepticism of organized religion ignited a debate between Christian theologians and Naturalists over whose philosophy was superior. Both the religious and Naturalist sides saw themselves as mutually exclusive, which polarized the topic of authority. Naturalists claimed science is a superior form of thought over religion because of its materialist basis and rational justifications. Naturalism was largely influenced by Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species*, which provides evidence of how humans evolve physically over time. Darwin's theory of evolution questions established theories about life, the most prominent of which was the Church of England's Creation Myth. Thomas Henry Huxley, because of his enthusiasm for Darwin's theory, became the spokesperson for scientific discourse. Huxley wholeheartedly argued that science is a distinct and better alternative to faith. George Levine quotes Huxley as stating, "The man of science has learned to believe in justification, not by faith but by verification" (Helmstadter and Lightman 225). According to Huxley, science's organized argument of proposed hypothesis, empirical evidence, and conclusive theory makes the discipline superior to religion. Completely overshadowing religion, Huxley wants nature to become God and the practice of science to become worship (Helmstadter and Lightman 225).

There was pushback against the Naturalist agenda. Although written much later, Frank Turner's book *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (1974) claims that men like Huxley were "demonstrating the existential, intellectual, and moral bankruptcy of scientific naturalism" (Helmstadter and Lightman 228). Turner echoes the counter arguments of the Victorian era aimed at strong voices like Huxley's. Naturalists used evidentiary support to assert their dominance, so theologians would focus on posing metaphysical questions. For example, a theologian asked Huxley to explain the Earth's existence and humans' presence. Huxley responded with the claim that physical science begins

from a starting point of certain realities, like the reality that humans live on Earth (Helmstadter and Lightman 235). By circumventing the initial question, Huxley refuses to admit that he is partaking in a metaphysical, and I daresay religious, discourse. With tradition on one side of the debate and novelty on the other, theologians and Naturalists never came to an agreement.

Yet, below the level of erudite arguments, "regular" Victorian people were not so polarized. Many people who welcomed Darwin's theory were religious themselves (Helmstadter and Lightman 227). The lower classes of Victorian society were fascinated with aspects of Naturalism that Huxley and Darwin proposed. However, they did not feel they had to relinquish all religious foundation in order to incorporate new ideas into their traditions. Although there was a strict dichotomy among intellectuals between science and religion, alternative religions blended the two disciplines to not only satisfy metaphysical questions, but also to provide empirical evidence for those religious claims.

It is no coincidence that Schreiner and Brontë both wrote texts questioning religion and exploring existential thought. The suspicion both authors feel towards organized religion infuses their novels and is concentrated in their main characters. Schreiner and Brontë were born into religious households. Schreiner was raised by Calvinist missionary parents in South Africa. Brontë grew up in a rural parish; her father was an Evangelical clergyman (Franklin 3). With the influence of religion forced upon these women at a young age, years of contemplating the subject inevitably seeped into their work. Both authors use literature to challenge the organized religious narratives they were subjected to in their youth. Olive Schreiner, in fact, lost her faith at the age of nine.[1] Characters like Waldo and Catherine, much like their creators, go through moments of

[1] While the age of nine may seem too young for Schreiner to reject a religious tradition, her decision was not unique. Another example of young loss of faith is the Irish-born British feminist writer Francis Power Cobbes. At the age of twelve, in 1834, Cobbes first questioned the validity of the Bible story "The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes" (Helmstadter and Lightman 30).

self-reflection paired with questions of proof in faith which set the stage for their eventual rejection of conventional Christianity.

The Story of an African Farm opens on a tranquil farm with a "full African moon" illuminating the earth (2). As Schreiner guides the reader further into the farm, we are introduced to Waldo, a young boy sitting up awake and alone. The large hunting watch by his father's bed is the only sound that fills his head. His anxiety and hysteria mount as the ticking "never waited; it went on inexorably; and every time it ticked a man *died*!" (3). The syntax of the sentence reflects Waldo's anxious thoughts. Just as each new idea follows after a semicolon, as opposed to separated sentences, Waldo's nerves compound on each other. Like the inevitable ticking of a watch, people constantly die. A ticking clock as the catalyst for Waldo's crisis directly critiques William Paley's Watchmaker Theory. Although largely forgotten today, William Paley's Watchmaker Theory, published in 1802, was a revolutionary and widely popular analysis of the Christian world. Paley's theory argues that just as all of the gears and widgets work together to make a watch run, all functions of life are meant for a higher purpose (Adam Shapiro 1). Paley presents a metaphor of God as a watchmaker to evoke awe and praise for a higher being that knows more and controls more than humans could ever comprehend. In essence, Paley claims that it is not worth questioning the world because anything that happens is part of God's plan. Waldo's reaction to the clock clearly does not evoke the sense of reassurance that Paley intended. Waldo instead becomes obsessed with the idea that humans are all subject to God's will, life and death out of their control. Waldo wonders, "and all the while the watch kept ticking on; just like God's will, that never changes or alters, you may do as you please" (Schreiner 4). Waldo equates himself to a ticking hand of a clock; they are both at the mercy of a higher power.

The watch transforms from Paley's interpretation to Schreiner's: from an object of glory to an object of fear.[2]

In the second section of Chapter One Waldo searches for physical evidence of God's presence. Setting a portion of mutton chop on a slab in the sun, Waldo hopes God will accept his sacrifice by sending fire down from heaven to scorch the meat (Schreiner 6). Waldo's sacrifice, if successful, would prove that not only is there a God, but as Mandy Treagus, in her chapter "Olive Schreiner: The Story of an African Farm," explains, "Part of this concern is expressed in an examination of the veracity of the Bible and whether it can be relied upon as a source of truth" (38). Waldo is testing God, as well as the validity of the Bible. After contemplating the will of God from the clock scene, the sacrifice is Waldo's next step in forming an epistemology. Yet God does not send down fire from heaven. Instead, "Only the sun had melted the fat of the little mutton chop, and it ran down the stones" (Schreiner 7). Schreiner pointedly notes that only the sun had an effect on the meat. This sacrifice does not show evidence of God; it shows evidence of nature. Instead of recognizing nature's power, however, Waldo interprets this moment as a failure of his Christian identity. In doubting God, he is undeserving of any evidential satisfaction. Although he sets the experiment to expose the validity of God and the Bible, Waldo essentially turns on himself to reinforce the ideal of the conventional Christian God.

Waldo's anguish over this failed experiment comes to fruition in the third section of the first chapter. After struggling with his faith for two years, Waldo shouts, "I love Jesus Christ, but I hate God" (9). Waldo's loss of faith is a contemptuous one. In a moment of passion and frustration, after thinking that God rejected him, Waldo turns the tables and rejects God.

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[2] See Appendix A

However, Waldo does not completely cut himself off from spirituality. He notes that he loves Jesus Christ, a physical, corporeal representation of God. Here we see a reference to Corporeal Spiritualism. Jesus is a quintessential example of a body communicating through and with God. When Waldo declares his love for Jesus, what he is really suggesting is that he loves the *idea* of Jesus—a physical proof of spirit.

Like Waldo, *Wuthering Heights*'s Catherine Linton also questions and later rejects organized religion. Midway through the novel, Catherine describes a disturbing dream she had to Nelly, her nurse. Catherine states that she would not be happy in heaven. Nelly responds with the Christian answer that because Catherine is a sinner, she would not be happy in heaven; she belongs in hell. Catherine brushes off this offensive comment rather quickly. She asserts that she had a dream where she was in heaven and it felt wrong. Catherine shares, "I was only going to say that heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, in the middle of the heath on top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy"(Brontë 62). Not only is Catherine's dream a premonition of her fate, but it is a metaphor for Brontë's rejection of mainstream Christian faith. Catherine does not belong as a follower of the church; it is not her home. According to Susan Gubar in her influential essay "Emily Brontë's Bible of Hell," Catherine is a religious outcast similar to Adam and Eve because she does not see heaven as her home (382). For a Christian analysis of *Wuthering Heights*, Gubar makes an astute point. But for our reading of the text, I take her point one step further to argue that Catherine's dream suggests she is outside of a conventional Christian narrative altogether. Catherine is perplexed by her dream, but awakes knowing that the core of her being does not ascribe to the motifs and practices of traditional Christianity.

Waldo and Catherine, as primary characters, internally struggle with their faith. As part of those struggles, the yearning protagonists must encounter the conventionally religious as well as the religious hypocrite. Bonaparte Blenkins and Joseph are both secondary characters who manipulate Christianity to support their self-delusion. Irony lies in the difference between who they believe they are and how they act. When Waldo and Catherine have doubts about their faith, their uncertainty is heightened by the religious characters around them. Joseph and Blenkins drive the main characters farther away from Christianity by exhibiting the darker side of organized religion. This darker side of religion is the opportunity for self-advancement and abuse of power.

In *The Story of an African Farm*, Bonaparte Blenkins is the corrupt wanderer who arrives at the karoo and wreaks havoc. Blenkins uses the guise of religious piety to win over the hearts of people in the community. Blenkins "is repeatedly proven to be a liar who misuses the Bible. In Blenkins's case, his misquotations are part of the comic construction of his villainous character" (Treagus 45). Mandy Treagus describes Blenkins's infamous fake sermon:

> He begins with a misquotation designed to suggest that his sermon has divine backing: 'a very few words are all I shall address to you, and may they be as a rod of iron dividing the bones from the marrow, and the marrow from the bones' (AF 70)…the actual biblical verse he half remembers reads, 'For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (KJV Heb. 4.12). (45-46)

Blenkins initiates his sermon by stating a half-remembered line, but what he remembers, and in turn forgets, highlights his egotistical nature. Blenkins takes God out of the narrative all together

and places himself in that position. God's word does not shed bone from marrow; Blenkins now has that authority. Similar to Waldo's sacrifice, the word of the Bible is being tested and is found failing. In fact, the Bible has now become a dangerous influence, showing that it can be manipulated by men like Blenkins (47). Blenkins uses religion and the Bible in order to elevate his position of authority in the community. There is a progression for Waldo: he first is destabilized from his Christian identity through doubt, then encounters Blenkins who embodies the potential for corruption in organized religion.

Brontë's derisive portrayal of Joseph, the servant, is the exemplification "of the warped Christianity, the ugly voice of fanaticism at the Heights"(Adams 61). Joseph's voice of "fanaticism" suggests Brontë's contempt for Christianity's slippery slope of devotion to sanctimony. Arnold Shapiro agrees that Joseph's exaggerated character is meant to critique the church. He writes, "Joseph, who sees everyone damned except himself and uses his 'sermonizing and pious discoursing' as a way of gaining influence. Joseph's religion is completely self-serving: he attacks those out of power in order to gain the approval of those in power" (286-287). Although Joseph does not have much real estate on the page, his quotations are packed with judgement. In chapter two, Joseph condemns Catherine Linton's daughter Cathy: "Aw wonder hagh yah can faishion tuh stand thear i' idleness un' war, when all on em's goan aght! Bud yah're a nowt, and it's noa use talking—yah'll niver mend uh yer ill ways; bud goa raight tuh t'devil, like yer mother afore ye!" (12).[3] Joseph attacks Cathy's religious character as a way to critique her work ethic and her morality. He starts by stating "I wonder" and yet continues to expostulate and speak for Cathy's lack of effort and character. He then claims there is no use

[3] Translated, "I wonder how you can bring yourself to stand there in idleness and worse when all of them have gone out! But you're nothing, and there's no use talking—you'll never mend your bad ways; but go right to the devil, like your mother before you."

listening to her because she is condemned to hell. Joseph shows a surplus of judgment and a lack of empathy, arguably non-Christian qualities. This harsh language is not unique to Joseph's vocabulary. Even his physical features, referenced as sour and "vinegar faced," indicate his harsh and unforgiving demeanor (7, 12). Joseph is deaf to anyone's suffering in the novel due to his sense of religious superiority.

Alternative spiritual faiths became a religious outlet for doubters of organized Christianity. Specifically, Natural Supernaturalism appealed to Victorians. Natural Supernaturalism is the reformulation of theological ideas within the realm of the mind and nature (Williams 106). Therefore, the natural world becomes evidential proof of a spiritual realm. The term first appears in Thomas Carlyle's book *Sartor Resartus (*1834)[4] in which he dedicates an entire chapter to this concept. Carlyle describes Natural Supernaturalism as God not being outside the world, but within it (Harding 16). M.H. Abrams, who wrote the groundbreaking work *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971), notes that Natural Supernaturalism "was, in diverse degrees and ways, to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine" (68). Carlyle challenges conventional thought by claiming that mundane aspects of nature are actually manifestations of the spirit realm. Carlyle's book describes a character who, "looked fixedly at Existence, til one after the other, its earthly hull and garnitures have all melted away; and now to his rapt vision the interior, Celestial, holiest of Holies, lies disclosed" (Harding 21). Carlyle's book was noted for being deeply emotional and eccentric. Through the language of nature, Carlyle argues, humans can have a uniquely intimate relationship with God. Natural Supernaturalism is an example of an alternative religion that still values the concept of a God as well as a spirit realm. While Natural Supernaturalism in Carlyle's

[4] Translated to *The Tailor re-Tailored.*

work focuses on the Christian term "God," I want to analyze the concept as offering a closer connection with spiritualism as a whole. Whether Carlyle intended to or not, his depiction of God in a radically new sense innately separates itself from conventional, hierarchical ideations of The Church of England's God. Just as alternative religion blends scientific arguments of evidence with religion, Natural Supernaturalism blends conventional ideas about God with unconventional modes of practice to create something wholly new.

The Story of an African Farm takes an interlude in Part Two of the novel to summarize the journey of young faith in organized religion, eventually lost over time, culminating in an adoption of Natural Supernaturalism's philosophy. The chapter "Times and Seasons" describes initial frustrations with religion that can be directly related to the existential struggles of Waldo in Part One of the novel. Schreiner describes a complete rejection of two different conceptions of God: "the God our fathers handed down to us, that we hated, and never liked; the new one we made for ourselves that we loved; but now he has flitted away from us" (113). This depiction of God represents the God of organized religion, of hierarchical power and rituals that left practitioners wanting more. This section mirrors Waldo's loss of faith in Part One, which reflects "a stage which Victorian bourgeois culture in general has to pass through in its accession to the modern spirit" (Treagus 39). Initial frustration leads Waldo, and the reader, to a "better" understanding of the world.

The narrator then moves from nihilism to find meaning in Nature with a capital "N." The significance of the capitalization could be personification; or it could be to define a new epistemology. Schreiner was a proponent of scientists like Huxley and Darwin, but more

importantly, theorist Herbert Spencer. Her turn to Nature is an appeal to these thinkers.[5] Spencer utilized Agnosticism, a belief in a higher being but not necessarily God, to bridge nature and science with spirituality.[6] The end of "Times and Seasons" implies an Agnostic approach to understanding the world. The narrator claims that "This thing we call existence; it is not something which has roots far down below the dark, and its branches stretching out in the immensity above, which we among the branches cannot see? Not a chance jumble; a living thing; a *One*. The thought gives us intense satisfaction, we cannot tell why" (Schreiner 118). This statement seems to contradict Natural Supernaturalism, but the word choice of Schreiner's metaphor is key to understanding an underlying sympathy. Her spirit feels satisfaction in knowing they are within a system connected to nature, yet they do not need to understand the intricacies of the system. Mandy Treagus agrees with this point stating, "The similarities between networks of blood-vessels, the outline of thorn trees and the antlers of the horned beetle gradually suggest a link within Nature, which grows into a sense of the unity — and meaning — of all things" (58). Both Schreiner and Natural Supernaturalism use nature as a tool for grappling with one's faith. The unity of nature and spirit, just like the network of blood vessels in an animal, can be seen and understood by humans. This leap may seem strange because of

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[5] Additionally, Schreiner was a fan of Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the founders of American Transcendentalism. Characters Waldo and Em are eponymous references to this groundbreaking writer. As another nod to Emerson, Schreiner published *The Story of an African Farm* under the pseudonym Ralph Iron. Transcendentalism was a philosophical movement originating in the 1830s in America that believed divinity pervades all humans and nature. Transcendentalism was a "wedding of natural and the divine in which the sublimity of nature became God's immanent investiture" (Franklin 13). With a heavy Romantic influence, Transcendentalism and Natural Supernaturalism show obvious parallels. Thomas Carlyle rearticulates Transcendental ideas through his definition of Natural Supernaturalism in *Sartor Resartus*. Due to the philosophical link between Carlyle and Emerson, Schreiner's theory of a spiritual "oneness" among humans, nature, and animals clearly reflects her admiration for both thinkers.

[6] Spencer highlighted the dual "theological and ethical aspect of evolutionary theory" which "maintained his synthetic philosophy did not need a divorce from 'inherited conceptions concerning religion and morality, but merely a purification and exaltation of them'" (Helmstadter and Lightman 300). As a way to emphasize the religious foundations of Agnosticism, Spencer blended aspects of evolutionary theory with an elevated sense of conventional moral notions. Schreiner's affirmation of Spencer's agnosticism in "Times and Seasons" also relies on a religious and spiritual component to understanding the world. It must, however, be "purified and exalted."

Carlyle's enthusiasm for using the term "God" and Schreiner's obvious contempt for it. But as I stated before, Carlyle's God cannot be viewed in the same lens as The Church of England's God. Despite Carlyle's Christian vocabulary and Schreiner's agnostic vocabulary, there is an overlap of interpretation in which Schreiner's Naturalist agenda connects to our interpretation of Natural Supernaturalism.

Additionally, in the beginning of the novel, Waldo voices Natural Supernatural philosophy without explicitly communicating to nature. Waldo looks at the mountains and exclaims, "'If they could talk, if they could tell us now!' he said, moving his hand out over the surrounding objects—'then we would know something'" (Schreiner 15). Communication with nature would give deeper meaning about spirits and life in general, but Waldo implies that humans know nothing about understanding nature in this way. Hannah Freeman, in her article "Dissolution and Landscape in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*," argues, "Through this dialogue, Schreiner reinforces one of her central premises — that there are multiple ways of knowing" (1). Compared to Christianity and God, Schreiner presents the mountains as an equally viable way to understand the world. Because the door is open for multiple interpretations, Waldo's curiosity about the mountains and the end of "Times and Seasons" provides an opportunity to read nature in a religious way, not simply in the traditional sense.

Similarly, in *Wuthering Heights*, the moors have a spirit of their own. During a passionate speech to the Brontë Society in 1902, Halliwell Sutcliffe writes, "To talk of that 'Spirit of the Moors' which is strong as rock, yet as airy as a dream. It is a little corner of the world... it is the touchstone of all romance, and spaciousness, and glamour" (156). Understanding the importance of the moors in *Wuthering Heights* exemplifies the "notion that

Natural Supernaturalism is an indispensable context for understanding Brontë's masterpiece" (Williams 107). While personification of nature is a theme of Romantic writing, Brontë's humanizing vocabulary implies a relationship between humans and the moors. Everything about the moors seems enchanted. The moors have "bees humming dreamily about the bloom, and the larks singing high up overhead, and the blue sky and bright sun shining steadily and cloudlessly" (Brontë 189). Within the natural landscape there is a unity of all beings, "living" like bees and larks, but also "nonliving" like the sky and sun. Heathcliff and Catherine interpret the spiritual language of the moors. Both characters spend an immense amount of time together on the untamed hills in their youth. A relationship develops among the three characters: Catherine, Heathcliff, and the moors. And it is no coincidence that Catherine and Heathcliff are buried together beneath that same earth. When Lockwood walks to their graves in the final scene of the novel, "the supernatural, romantic elements of this world are somehow present also for him" (Williams 126). The moors are speaking to Lockwood just the same as they have been to Catherine and Heathcliff. Lockwood notes, "the moths fluttering among the heath and hare bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass…" (Brontë 258). The landscape is alive in this scene; the reader gets a glimpse of how Catherine and Heathcliff have been influenced by this natural home their entire lives. Although this quote and last line of the novel are from Lockwood's perspective, the final voice is truly from the spirit of those wild hills.

Spirituality in England was not simply within the natural landscape. The physicality of Corporeal Spiritualism separates this alternative religion from Spiritual Naturalism. As I explained in the preface, Corporeal Spiritualism is a term I created to signify an interaction with the spirit realm through the conduit of the human body. By the 1850s, popularity of spiritual practices had stretched from America to England (Willburn 3). Mediumship and possession are

within the umbrella of Corporeal Spiritualism (Franklin 4). To look specifically at mediumship, a medium could read spirits for themselves or for others. If reading for a group, this meeting was typically called a séance. Groups would gather around a table while the medium called upon spirits from an invisible realm to speak to or though her.[7] According to Sarah Willburn's book, *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth Century Mystical Writing (2006)*, "Spiritualists believed the dead and disembodied could 'materialize' at a séance or that their words or deeds could be channeled through the mouth and body of a medium who could see them" (51). Mediums would describe spirituality as having a "fluid boundary" between the invisible spirit realm and the visible human realm (50). The permeability between the visible and invisible allowed for a wealth of opportunities to communicate with spirits. This possibility of communication generated heated debate in Victorian society.

In 1863, Victorian spiritualist Sophia De Morgan writes, "When the ideal precedes the actual, all sorts of unusual experiences can become easily normalized because of a new understanding of the hidden and then revealed power that the spirit realm holds in shaping the real" (Willburn 70). The term "ideal" in De Morgan's comment underscores the debate over the validity of Corporeal Spiritualism. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "ideal" is defined as "Existing as an idea or archetype" as well as "Existing only in idea; confined to thought or imagination; imaginary; opposed to real or actual"(Oxford English Dictionary). Both definitions were used during the Victorian era, and while they may seem very similar, the second

[7] Women were the main population of Corporeal Spiritualists like mediums. Camilla Crossland, one of the major proponents of spiritualism in the 1850s, claimed that women were closer to the spirit realm than men. To analyze Corporeal Spirituality in a completely social rather than religious way, one could argue that women used corporeal spiritualism to attain power and cache in Victorian society. There is a power imbalance in the "inexplicable but superior spiritual powers of women" (Willburn 68). Additionally, because women were drawn to spiritualism, the center of spiritual discourse shifted away from "the patriarchally controlled public sphere dominated by traditional religious institutions to more private and domestic spheres"(Franklin 32). Women were subjected to the home and private sphere at the time. So a religion that was naturally suited to the private sphere allowed for increased female ownership and participation.

definition insists that the ideal does not define the actual. De Morgan uses the second definition of "ideal" to play with her dichotomy of idealization versus actualization. Critics of Corporeal Spiritualism echo DeMorgan's claim that human interpretation has a larger influence over supernatural messages than spiritual intervention.

Criticism did not shame or squash the growing interest in Corporeal Spiritualism, however. The Victorian author Elizabeth Barrett Browning notes, "My theology is simply physical, and has to do with ordinary nature. I understand by a medium a peculiar physical aptitude" (Willburn 6). Browning implies that a medium is born with a certain physical ability that allows her to connect with an invisible realm. Someone is either born with the ability to interpret spirits, or not. Browning's claim was a common belief among Victorian Corporeal Spiritualists. The idea of innate physicality was an argument aimed at disbelievers of the practice. If one did not understand how a human could read an invisible world, then they did not possess mediumship skills. Physicality of mediumship depended on the ability to see into a permeable, invisible realm. According to Browning and other Corporeal Spiritualists, doubters like Sophia De Morgan simply were not born with an interpretive or visible power, and therefore were critical of mediums. For Corporeal Spiritualists, the proof of their practice was actually a faith in their medium's or their own interpretive skills.

The moment of Waldo's death in *The Story of an African Farm* plays with themes of Corporeal Spiritualism, although they are heavily masked. Up until this point, we have spoken about possession and mediumship. Elizabeth Barrett Browning would argue that none of the characters in this novel were born with the physical aptitude of mediumship. The presence of spirit in *The Story of an African Farm* can easily be overlooked if reading this novel through an exclusively Naturalistic lens. However, Waldo's ruminations on the world and his interaction

with the chickens at the close of the novel represent a sense of connection to spirituality. After his suffering, Waldo does find a oneness with the world before his death (Freeman 1). Waldo's death is a strange one: he basks in the sun, on his usual train of thought wondering about the world. Schreiner does not share with the reader his final thoughts, only that he mutters to himself in his "old-fashioned" way, leaving room for multiple interpretations about his end.

As he mutters to himself, Waldo reaches out to the playful chickens around him, but none of them accept his peace offering. However, after Waldo dies, the chickens crawl on him, one "rubbed its little head softly against his black curls" (Schreiner 270). There is a sense of empathy between Waldo and the chickens, even though he has already passed. Although this is not the typical form of Corporeal Spiritualism that Victorians were practicing, there are hints of unity between Waldo's spirit and the chickens.[8] Corporeal Spiritualism does not have to be between a human body and a spirit: it can be between *any* body and a spirit. In the case of *The Story of an African Farm*, it is the chickens communicating with the spirit of Waldo after he has passed. As I mentioned, the chickens do not approach Waldo until after he dies. Something has happened over the course of his death that leads to a spiritual connection between the chickens and Waldo. Waldo even references the chickens as "brother spirits," indicating a closer connection to the animals. "The chickens were wiser" is the final line of the novel. The term wiser is essential to the overall comprehension of the chickens' spirits. Schreiner leaves the reader on the question of the chickens as wiser compared to who or what? By ending then novel in this way, Schreiner is

[8] Chickens as fully sentient beings exist within the realm of Schreiner's world. Her spiritual philosophy valued intense suffering as the foundation of life. Furthermore, a necessity in life is recognizing empathy for another spirit's suffering. Schreiner adds an interlude at the end of chapter five, focusing in on a dung beetle who ends up eaten by the dog Doss. The characterization of the dung beetle connects him to Waldo's struggle. Schreiner describes the dung beetle's life and death as "A striving, and a striving, and an end in nothing" (74). Yet Schreiner's philosophy validates the spirit of all living creatures, and she portrays this mostly through personifying animals like the dung beetle, Doss, and the chickens.

presenting the chickens as equal partners in Waldo's spiritual journey. Although Waldo is dead, the chickens are wise enough to communicate with his spirit and help him achieve his lifelong dream of finding unity between himself, nature, and the divine.

Emily Brontë incorporates Corporeal Spiritualism more obviously into her novel *Wuthering Heights*. From the onset of the novel, Brontë plays with themes of spirituality. Mr. Lockwood spends his first night at Wuthering Heights in Catherine Linton's bedroom. Mr. Lockwood is a man who values Wuthering Heights for its isolation and "refusal of community" (Brontë 397). Ironically, Wuthering Heights does offer a community, but it is based around human and spirit, as opposed to human and human. Upon falling asleep, Mr. Lockwood has an encounter with the spirit realm. Jolted awake, Lockwood discovers the cause of his dream: the sound of a branch brushing against his window. Lockwood's initial dream was manufactured by something natural. Yet when he falls asleep again there is no natural explanation for his encounter with Catherine's ghost. Lockwood notices her spirit when his "fingers closed on the fingers of an ice-cold hand!" (Brontë 20). This ghostly embrace immediately asserts the permeability between the visible and invisible realm. Catherine's spirit then grasps Lockwood's arm after he pulls away in fear. She has such a firm grip on him that he begins to scrape her arm against the shattered window pane in order to hurt her. Lockwood incorporates both the material world and the spiritual world through violence. He hopes that scraping her hand against the glass will force Catherine to let go. But because she is not human, Catherine does not react to the pain of her shredded wrist. Lockwood mentions that this violence is out of character, but he is frightened and doesn't know what else to do. The brutality and gruesomeness of the scene evoke a sense of horror, but also authenticity. The onset of the novel begins with the intrusion of the

spirit realm as a way to assert the validity of spiritual belief. Lockwood is not having a typical nightmare, but an encounter with the spirit realm.

Once Catherine's ghost lets go, she begs to be let inside. Lockwood shouts, "I'll never let you in, not if you beg for twenty years!" (Brontë 21). Twenty years, Catherine explains, is precisely how long she has been wandering on the moors waiting to get inside Wuthering Heights. Although small, this detail suggests Mr. Lockwood knows the specific amount of twenty years. I would argue that despite Lockwood's best efforts, as a man who "refuses community," he is communicating with the spirit realm. After physical contact with Catherine, he acts as a possessed body. Mr. Lockwood is an outsider to Wuthering Heights. He could have no knowledge of Catherine's exile; he had only just learned about her hours before this incident. The knowledge of those twenty years came from the spirit realm and materialized itself through Lockwood's frightened exclamation. Corporeal Spiritualism indicates the body as the conduit for spiritual interaction, and Lockwood's interaction with the ghost of Catherine suggests that he is born with the "peculiar physical aptitude" that Elizabeth Barrett Browning articulates as being essential to mediumship.

Lockwood is not the only character visited and tormented by Catherine's spirit. Heathcliff and Catherine's love famously reaches beyond human bounds, and so do their interactions. By the end of Heathcliff's life, he becomes so enraptured with Catherine's spirit that some critics claim Heathcliff commits suicide in order to reunite with his love. Brontë executes the fascination that other Gothic writers like Edward Bulwer-Lytton had with "the idea that some vitalistic power, at once spiritual and scientific, might permit life extension" (Franklin 32). Physical "proof" of Catherine's spirit shows in Heathcliff's appearance. Nelly notes that Heathcliff's demeanor is unnatural, "his frame shivering, not as one shivers with chill or

weakness, but as a tight stretched cord vibrates—a strong thrilling rather than chilling" (Brontë 250). Heathcliff's depleted health and sallow face, like a canvas, depict evidence of Catherine's attachment to him. Heathcliff trembles as if under constant physical and psychological stress. Victorian spiritualists would claim that his physical appearance is visible proof of a spirit wreaking havoc on his body. Catherine, just as she had physically grabbed Lockwood's wrist, is now pulling Heathcliff closer to death. Heathcliff is in constant communication with Catherine's spirit throughout the entire novel. But by the end of his life, I argue Catherine goes so far as to possess Heathcliff's body.

In one of his final monologues, Heathcliff denies that he is afraid of death: "And yet I cannot continue in this condition! I have to remind myself to breathe—almost to remind my heart to beat!...I have a single wish, and my whole being and faculties are yearning to attain it" (Brontë 248). Heathcliff recognizes a dramatic change in his nature. Although he does not outright claim that Catherine's spirit is controlling his thoughts or body, Heathcliff notes that he is losing power over faculties that should come naturally to him, like breathing. Over time, Heathcliff refuses to eat and starves himself to death. Nelly finds Heathcliff dead in bed, with a smile on his face. Heathcliff, a man infamous during his life for his monstrous brutality, was not one to smile regularly. According to Susan Gubar, opposites coexist in this novel: "Funerals are weddings, weddings funerals"(Brontë 283). Professor Barbara Black coined this juxtaposition, "coffin love" (Jan 2020). Just as Heathcliff is coexisting with Catherine during his possession, his death represents a wedding between the two spirits. Heathcliff's manic demeanor before his death and the subsequent smile on his deceased face imply that his spirit is reunited with Catherine. Heathcliff's lifeless body lies on the bed, eventually to be buried beneath the moors,

reconnecting both to the natural—the soil under the heath—and simultaneously, the embodied spirit of Catherine.

In their novels, *The Story of an African Farm* and *Wuthering Heights*, Schreiner and Brontë not only project their own philosophies, but also reflect the multitude of religious interests of the Victorian cultural imaginary. Popularity of Natural Supernaturalism and Corporeal Spiritualism in England was a reaction to dissatisfaction with Christianity's rigid rituals and prohibitions. Victorians' sense of spiritual and intellectual curiosity led to different executions of the same goal: physical proof that one could have an intimate connection with the divine. The spiritual quest's incentive to find proof of the divine metamorphosized into a deeper explanation of religious sense within the individual. People were able to categorize, or put a name to, intense feelings of religiosity that had previously been denied or prohibited by The Church of England. Within themselves, Victorians could validate and expand on intimate relationships with the sacred spirit realm. Schreiner and Brontë's novels are crucial to the forming of the Victorian cultural imaginary; their characters embark on journeys of faith to move beyond presentations of proof and toward a closer, personal connection with the divine.

Epilogue

Religion is a timeless discourse that attempts to answer seemingly unanswerable questions. The condition of religion's metaphysical foundation comes at the cost of endless debate. Regardless of the practice, organized or alternative, questions of religion are constantly being challenged and re-answered. The basis of God, spirits, or the truth of the world will never be universally agreed upon. However, debates over and within religions are not a drawback, but a benefit to their existence.

Because religion can always be questioned, we are forced to hold ourselves and our belief systems to a certain standard. The implications of my capstone, I hope, lead the reader to think about what they take for granted. Everyone is raised accepting certain values and truths. Questioning and validating these truths is a necessary part of maturing and forming a life philosophy. The Victorians were not afraid to question the authority of the Church and, therefore, their own existence. We must ask ourselves, just as the Victorians did, what is my religion providing me, and is it enough to satisfy my spiritual curiosity?

Victorians seriously considered the enigma of "religious truth." There was, in essence, a religious quest for proof of the sacred. Thinkers like Thomas Carlyle took enormous strides to establish a practice of communication with the divine outside of organized tradition. My title includes the term "radical manifestations of the spirit" for a reason. These practices of communication with the spirit realm were radical, risky, and groundbreaking because they challenged the doctrine of The Church of England. Victorian spirit seekers asked themselves what they cared about most, at the core of their being, and then took action to see those desires come to fruition. I commend spiritualists of the nineteenth century for their bravery, curiosity,

and determination, without which the Victorian cultural imaginary would have lost its sense of religious fulfillment.

Appendix A

William Paley's Watchmaker theory has largely fallen into anonymity. But at the time of its publication in 1802, the English clergyman was writing on a popular topic. Paley was not the first to equate God to a watchmaker. Watches were essential to modern technology of the time and the best watchmakers were in England. Adam Shapiro's article in *The Atlantic* critiques Paley's version of God that was used in his watchmaker metaphor. Shapiro claims him to be "a specific interpretation of a Christian God, one who smiled upon British industry and imperialism" (1). Shapiro's point supports Schreiner's critique of Paley, as she was famous for her feminist and later anti-imperialist agenda while living in a colonized South Africa. Not only did Paley's God represent British industry and imperialism but, more aligned with the subject of this paper, he represented the authority of The Church of England and opposition to radical or revolutionary change (1). Objection to Paley's theory represents a change in social and religious agenda. Dissatisfaction with the all-knowing figure of God critiques a world where British imperialism is applauded and colonial atrocities are overlooked. A God so abstract he can only be related through metaphor has lost its touch in the time of the mid-Victorian era, and authors like Olive Schreiner reflect that dissatisfaction.

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