CHRISTOPHER NEWMAN’S HAIRCLOTH SHIRT: WORLDLY ASCETICISM, CONVERSION, AND AUTO-MACHIA IN THE AMERICAN

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Henry James’s *The American* (1876-77) presents itself almost as allegory. The hero’s surname, Newman, suggests a modern *Pilgrim’s Progress*. He inherits his Christian name, Christopher, from the man who, as Mlle. Nioche puts it, “invented America” (*American* 520); she refers to Columbus as Newman’s “patron saint,” and the American resonances of the name Christopher should not blind us to its religious significance: the bearer of Christ. It is another, more modern faith that Christopher Newman feels himself appointed to bear back across the sea. This Protestant, hard-working, democratic new man strays into an old world of Catholicism, leisure, and aristocracy; the Paris that Newman encounters even has some of the qualities of Bunyan’s City of Destruction. Peter Brooks has traced James’s “melodrama of consciousness” (*Melodramatic* 57; see also “The Turn” 46) to the popular theatre and the novels of Balzac, yet James also draws on the American Puritan tradition of *auto-machia*, or “war within the self” (Bercovitch 15-25). The moral struggles he describes, however secular the terms in which the characters may phrase them, retain the flavor and the seriousness of religious struggle. Through his revision of the traditional Protestant motifs of conversion and *auto-machia* in *The American*, James prefigures many of the insights of Max Weber and shows the inheritance of Protestant values by the modern American ethic. This spiritual dimension of James’s first major novel gestures both backward to the influence of a Protestant tradition and forward to James’s influence on the modernist understanding of the divided or fragmented self.

The novel’s “romantic” plot depends for its effect on a conflict between the values of the modern, post-Protestant, American Newman and his feudal,
Catholic, European rivals, the Bellegardes (Preface, American NYE xiv). Read as a late descendant of Protestant allegory, the novel relies on and reinforces anti-Catholic stereotypes: Catholicism represents old rituals, hyperconsciousness of rank, an unhealthy otherworldliness, casuistic reasoning, devious conduct, and mistreatment of women. Some of the prejudices that James will attribute to Waymarsh in The Ambassadors seem already operative in The American's representation of Catholicism:

The Catholic Church, for Waymarsh—that was to say the enemy, the monster of bulging eyes and far-reaching quivering groping tentacles—was exactly society, exactly the multiplication of shibboleths, exactly the discrimination of types and tones, exactly the wicked old Rows of Chester, rank with feudalism; exactly in short Europe. (Ambassadors, 1: 41)

Some such equation between Europe and the Roman Catholic Church shapes the moral landscape of The American as well, and the novel can easily be read as the story of how a Protestant American runs afoul of that institution and makes as good a retreat as he can.

Yet, beneath the surface conflict with the whore of Babylon, The American reveals dissension within the breast of its confident hero, specifically in his figuration as Benjamin Franklin, modeling the American values of self-reliance, ingenuity, and enlightened self-interest. If James's references to Franklin seem generally approving, however, his portrait of Newman suggests conflicts underlying the Franklinian worldview. In particular, behind his facade of "contemporaneous optimism," Newman suffers from some of the self-doubt characteristic of his (and Franklin's) Puritan forebears (American 793). The persistence of the theological themes of conversion and auto-machia in the novel points to the origins of Henry James's interest in the double consciousness or divided self of the modern subject. A reading of The American in terms of religious experience suggests, then, that one of the distinctive characteristics of the modern self—its division against itself—involves a renewed attention to a problem that was central to a much earlier American religious tradition.

Attention to the Protestant religious context for The American provides a deeper understanding of some of the central critical debates surrounding the novel. Leon Edel, for instance, has noted that it is Newman rather than the Bellegardes who "emerges the good Christian," while Oscar Cargill alludes to what he takes to be James's Protestant prejudices and complains of the inadequacy of his representation of religious themes (Edel 253). Cargill also suggests that the name "Newman" may allude to the controversy surrounding John Henry (later Cardinal) Newman's conversion to Catholicism in 1845 (439, n. 1). More recently, Edwin Fussell has observed the element of "Catholic melodrama" in James's presentation of European society, and John Carlos Rowe has interpreted the Catholicism of the Bellegardes as part of a "political allegory" of the position of the legitimistes in the early years of the French Third
Republic. As regards Newman’s own spiritual heritage, Irving Howe has noted that, although Newman made his fortune in San Francisco, his consciousness is that of “a New Englander, a descendant of Hawthorne’s men of conscience and a forerunner of James’ own Lambert Strether in The Ambassadors.”

Two important recent studies, James Duban’s The Nature of True Virtue and Andrew Taylor’s Henry James and the Father Question, while not directly addressing The American at any length, both indicate the importance for James of the Protestant heritage and of his father’s theological studies. Duban emphasizes the influence of Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Hopkins on Henry James, Sr.’s thought, whereas Taylor provides a more general picture of the father’s reaction to his Calvinist upbringing and to the thought of Emerson. I differ somewhat from Duban and Taylor in that, although I believe that the novelist Henry James, Jr. clearly addresses theological issues, I suspect that much of this inheritance was unconscious. It is notable, however, that James took time out from writing The American in 1876 to write “The Ghostly Rental,” a story about an inquisitive theology student steeped in the teachings of Edwards and Hopkins. None of these critics, however, has explored the crucial relationship between Newman’s half-unconscious Protestantism and his status as a representative modern American. The Protestant context makes it possible to see more clearly the nature of James’s critique of the American character; it also throws light on some of the other broad issues in criticism of The American, such as the status of romance or melodrama vs. realism in the text, Newman’s unconscious life, the conflict between arranged and “love” marriages, and James’s portrayal of power and the spirit of capitalism.

Early in their courtship, Newman notes with surprise the “gravity” of Mme. de Cintre’s statement that she is a Roman Catholic (594). Only after she decides to enter the convent does Newman register the significance of her religion:

He had never let the fact of her Catholicism trouble him; Catholicism to him was nothing but a name, and to express a mistrust of the form in which her religious feelings had moulded themselves would have seemed to him on his own part a rather pretentious affectation of Protestant zeal. If such superb white flowers as that could bloom in Catholic soil, the soil was not insalubrious. But it was one thing to be a Catholic, and another to turn nun—on your hands. There was something lugubriously comical in the way Newman’s thoroughly contemporaneous optimism was confronted with this dusky old-world expedient. (793)

To Newman, Catholicism had seemed primarily a question of “religious feelings” that “moulded themselves.” Only when Mme. de Cintre proposes to leave him does he realize the importance of Catholic institutions that have molded her and her family. James’s free indirect discourse leaves us uncertain whether, even at this crisis, Newman himself sees the lugubrious comedy
of his situation, but we know that throughout the novel he has consciously experienced culture shock. With his “intensely Western” background (532), Newman has seen the Parisian world as Oriental: the houses of the Faubourg Saint-Germain resemble “Eastern seraglios” (555), the Bellegardes’ country home a “Chinese penitentiary” (782). A French duchess bears for him “a very fair likeness to a reverend effigy in some idolatrous shrine” (723).

A political valence also marks the difference between Newman and his European counterparts. Newman stands for his entire country, as a self-made man, a veteran of the Civil War, and an unself-conscious democrat. He holds a “genuinely democratic assumption of every one’s right to lead an easy life” (541) and believes that every man has “an equal right to” a beautiful wife (549). He claims to be just as “noble” as the Bellegardes (621), but eventually recognizes that they do not consider him a “gentleman” (844).5 The conflict between Protestant and Catholic faiths forms part of the broader encounter between new world and old, west and east, democracy and aristocracy. Newman himself is “not particularly” interested in “theology,” but James reserves a special sense of horror for Newman’s reaction to Mme. de Cintré’s taking of the veil: “The idea struck Newman as too dark and horrible for belief…. He clasped his hands and began to tremble, visibly” (594, 790). Catholicism here seems particularly associated with the system of arranged marriage and dowry; “in America, girls are [n]ever subjected to compulsion” (591). Fussell notes that James’s revisions for the New York Edition tend to step up the rhetoric surrounding Catholicism: instead of asking, “Are you a Catholic, Mrs. Bread?” Newman, in the New York Edition, asks, “Are you of this awful faith, Mrs. Bread?” (qtd. in Fussell 82).

James type-casts Newman as “The American,” but he also reveals Newman’s own doubts about American mores, and the novel describes a conflict of value systems in which it is sometimes difficult to make out which values are most praiseworthy. At the beginning of the novel, the assurance of his own and his country’s election sits on Newman as a vague cultural presupposition (a “democratic assumption”) rather than a conscious article of faith (541). Newman is no Protestant zealot and he seems to care little for matters theological, yet his typicality as an American reflects his Protestant assumptions. In this he resembles earlier avatars of American individualism. Newman’s ethical beliefs have an important pedigree. Upon meeting him, M. de la Rochefidèle, an aged friend of the Bellegardes, recollects one of the newcomer’s compatriots: “Monsieur is by no means the first American that I have seen,” he said. “Almost the first person I ever saw—to notice him—was an American....The great Dr. Franklin. Of course I was very young. He was received very well in our monde” (671). Something of Benjamin Franklin’s spirit seems to have pervaded Newman’s life in America, and the narrator has already compared Newman’s penniless arrival in San Francisco after the Civil War to Dr. Franklin’s in Philadelphia. The repeated comparisons emphasize
Newman's typicality. Despite his great accomplishments, Franklin presented himself, and has been seen by posterity, as a typical American of the eighteenth century. His virtues—energy, ingenuity, forthrightness—and vices—notably pride—were typical of the new country. Newman plays a similar role for the nineteenth century. The frequent use of a melodramatic conception of Catholicism and allusions to Newman's own half-conscious Protestantism emphasize his continuity with a line of typical Americans stretching back through Franklin to Cotton Mather. Like these forebears, Newman plays the role that Mitchell Breitweiser has described as "representative personality" (Cotton Mather). As Max Weber noted, Franklin was also one of the great transitional figures between the ethic of radical Protestantism and the modern spirit of capitalism. Newman subscribes to the spirit of capitalism far more than to any traditional Protestant beliefs, and indeed he is almost without explicitly religious sentiments. He does represent, however, that spirit of "worldly asceticism" that Max Weber ascribes to Protestant ethics, and there seems to be some Mather mixed in with the Franklin of Newman's personality.

In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904-05), Weber traced the origins of capitalism to the development of an attitude of worldly asceticism grounded in the writings of radical Protestants. Weber explained worldly asceticism as the transference of a monastic attitude of self-denial to the world outside the monasteries. Weber's worldly ascetics subscribe to a number of characteristic beliefs: the idea that this world is utterly fallen; the belief that only God's grace, and no human action, can assure salvation; and the attendant radical sense of the sinfulness of the individual. According to Weber, when combined with the doctrine that a limited number of elect were predestined for salvation, these beliefs led to worldly asceticism. In describing the asceticism of Protestant sects and their contribution to capitalist beliefs, Weber cites a number of passages from Benjamin Franklin on the theme "time is money," and on related topics such as the evils of idleness and of failure to invest one's capital. For example, Franklin admonishes his readers, "He that idly loses five shillings' worth of time, loses five shillings, and might as prudently throw five shillings into the sea" (qtd. in Weber 50). The remarkable factor in such typically capitalist beliefs, according to Weber, is the utter reversal of traditional taboos against the accumulation of money, to the point at which making money is not only tolerated but is in fact enjoined as an ethical or even religious duty. Weber notes the "ascetic tendency" of the typical businessman's life: "He gets nothing out of his wealth for himself, except the irrational sense of having done his job well" (71). This "conception of money-making as an end in itself" runs "contrary to the ethical feelings of whole epochs" and presents Weber with an enigma: "how could activity, which was at best ethically tolerated, turn into a calling in the sense of Benjamin Franklin?" (73-74). Weber's answer may help to explain James's interest in the conflict between the unthinkingly Protestant Newman and the self-consciously Catholic Bellegardes.
Weber traces the development of the capitalist spirit to a theological idea, Martin Luther's "conception of the calling." For Weber, the monastic values of the medieval Church involved an overcoming of the temptations of "the world" by withdrawal from them. The new "worldly asceticism" promoted by Luther's conception of the calling, on the other hand, required a belief in the superiority of living an active life in the world, but doing so in a godly manner. In Luther's ethical teaching,

at least one thing was unquestionably new: the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume....The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling. (80)

Weber quotes Sebastian Franck to the effect that "now every Christian had to be a monk all his life" (121). For Weber, the doctrine of predestination leads inexorably to such methods of self-control as Franklin's spiritual bookkeeping on his progress in different virtues. Such detailed spiritual accounting, for Weber, smooths the way for the capitalist rationalization of labor, and for the utter dominance in the capitalist worldview of the slogan "time is money." At the same time, the demand to make the most of one's talents on earth, along with the removal of the taboo against accumulation of money, permits the development of large fortunes that must be productively invested.

At first blush, the Puritan's intense consciousness of sin and trust in God's grace seem far removed from Newman's "thoroughly contemporaneous optimism." Yet James emphasizes the peculiar ethical attitudes that make Newman a typical American capitalist, and he represents Newman as undergoing a number of spiritual crises that can be traced to his Protestant roots. In addition to reminding M. de la Rochefidèle of Benjamin Franklin, Newman shares some of Franklin's characteristic qualities. He has unbounded energy, great confidence, and a strong sense of self-control. Like Franklin, Newman understands that "time is money." He shares Franklin's dislike for wasted time and his sense that one must make the most of one's talents here on earth. When Mme. de Cintré's brother, Valentin, fails to find a career, Newman is filled with "spiritual zeal" in his quest to convert him into a businessman. His "ardor was in part the result of that general discomfort which the sight of all uninvested capital produced in him; so fine an intelligence as Bellegarde's ought to be dedicated to high uses" (741). One of Newman's weaknesses is his tendency to measure all values in terms of money. In the Louvre, he is less concerned about misjudging the quality of a work than about overvaluing its market worth. Together with this capitalist materialism, Newman has a strong sense of making money as itself a calling. He tells Mme. de Cintré: "I cared for money-making, but I never particularly cared for the money. There
was nothing else to do, and it was impossible to be idle" (688). There is an un-earthly quality to Newman’s faith in capitalism, a sense that fulfilling his calling as a man of business is a religious duty. James writes of Newman: “he had always found something to enjoy in the pressure of necessity, even when it was as irritating as the haircloth shirt of the mediaeval monk” (533). We may suspect that the sense of wearing a haircloth shirt in fact forms part of the pleasure that the pressure of necessity gives Newman. Newman, then, shares some of the worldly asceticism that, for Weber almost thirty years later, would be the most remarkable quality of Benjamin Franklin.

Both The American and Weber’s Protestant Ethic are structured around a conflict between two types of asceticism. To show the difference between the Catholic and Protestant attitudes to the fallen world of our earthly existence, Weber contrasts Dante’s Divine Comedy and Milton’s Paradise Lost. Whereas the Comedy ends with the poet’s speechless contemplation of God’s secrets, Paradise Lost ends with Adam and Eve expelled from Paradise: “The world was all before them, there to choose / Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.” Meanwhile, Michael has told Adam:

...Only add
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable; add faith;
Add virtue, patience, temperance; add love,
By name to come called Charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loth
To leave this Paradise, but shall possess
A Paradise within thee, happier far. (88)

Weber’s contrast between the active life outside of Paradise promised to Adam and Eve and the contemplation of divine goodness vouchsafed to Dante suggests the different imagined ends of The American. Newman would prefer to pursue “with wand’ring steps and slow” his calling in the world, hand in hand with Claire de Cintre; indeed, Mrs. Tristram has told Newman near the beginning of the novel, “Now you have the world before you” (545). Mme. de Cintre, on the other hand, prefers to retreat into an otherworldly asceticism; she “go[es] out of the world” (789) and on her twenty-seventh birthday becomes “Sister Veronica,” taking her name from her patron saint (866).

The Weberian thesis about the origins of the capitalist spirit has always had to confront the fact that the most typical of capitalists, Benjamin Franklin, rejected the Puritan religion of his father and of his native New England. Defenders of the Weberian thesis, like Mitchell Breitweiser, have pointed out that Franklin’s elaborate systems for training himself in various virtues show structural similarities to the Puritans’ efforts to subordinate their own wills to God’s. Whereas a Puritan like Cotton Mather sought to destroy all sense of self by subjugating his desires and his talents to God’s commands,
Franklin continues the subjugation of wayward desires but puts it in service of a new conception of the sovereign self, which defines the self as “calculation, ingenuity, and industry” (Breitweiser 8). Where Puritans saw a conflict between God and the self, and a need to subjugate the self, Franklin saw a conflict between the rightfully governing parts of the self and those desires and impulses that threatened self-government.

Newman, like Franklin, seems for the most part immune to religious doubt about his calling on earth, yet hints of his own internal conflicts become more pronounced as the novel proceeds. For most of the novel, his faith in square dealing seems unshaken. Indeed, though he shares the ethical precepts of worldly asceticism, his outlook on the world is cheerful and self-reliant. Everything in his world appears to Newman to be available for purchase or equatable to cash:

> The world, to his sense, was a great bazar, where one might stroll about and purchase handsome things....He had not only a dislike, but a sort of moral mistrust, of uncomfortable thoughts, and it was both uncomfortable and slightly contemptible to feel obliged to square one’s self with a standard. One’s standard was the ideal of one’s own good-humored prosperity. (574)

Newman’s attitude here is what William James would call “healthy-minded” (78 ff): “uncomfortable thoughts” are the object of his “moral mistrust.” He seems to feel a duty to enjoy life. Unlike such a later Jamesian hero as Lambert Strether, Newman does not lose his confidence in American values because of the appeal of the European alternative. The main jolt to his serenity results from the double-dealing of the Bellegardes. Newman considers, after the Bellegardes have agreed to “favor [his] suit” with Mme. de Cintre (665), that a “contract” has been made (672). After she accepts him, though, the Bellegardes withdraw their favor. Mme. de Bellegarde commands her daughter to break off the engagement, and the only explanation the family offers to Newman is that “we really cannot reconcile ourselves to a commercial person” (758). Newman suspects “foul play,” and the gothic phase of the novel begins (757): Valentin dies in a duel, Claire is “buried alive” by her family in the convent, and the late marquis turns out to have been virtually murdered on his death-bed by family members. While the plot wanders off in search of fantastic horrors, however, the story of Newman’s ethical beliefs also progresses. The encounter with the medieval superstitions of Europe has its counterpart in Newman’s encounter with hidden parts of his own soul.

_The American_ bears some of the marks of allegory—surnames that indicate a character’s spiritual status, conventional moral landscapes, sharp clashes of good and evil—and the gothic twists of the novel’s plot seem in a rather vague way to correspond to changes in Newman’s own spiritual state. In general, Newman’s healthy-minded attitude to the world around him seems quite at odds with the sort of spiritual struggle undergone by Bunyan’s Christian or the New
England Puritans. Yet Newman is more of a Protestant than he realizes, as his horror at the idea of Mme. de Cintre in a convent shows. In the second chapter of the novel, James tells of at least two spiritual transformations that Newman has undergone before arriving in Europe, and these experiences resemble the traditional Protestant conversion narratives common to Puritanism, other radical forms of Calvinism, and Methodism. Together, they suggest that Newman's "democratic assurance" is threatened by forces of which he is barely conscious.

The first of these miniature conversion narratives serves as the occasion of the narrator's first comparison between Newman and Benjamin Franklin. Just before his arrival in San Francisco, Newman has experienced "his most vivid conception of a supernatural element in the world's affairs": "there seemed to him something stronger in life than his own will. But the mysterious something could only be the devil, and he was accordingly seized with an intense personal enmity to this impertinent force" (533). Where a Puritan convert would have experienced the grace of God, Newman senses only the devil. Rather than rely on God's grace as a source of confidence, Newman makes his own fortune: "Newman's sole aim in life had been to make money; what he had been placed in the world for was, to his own perception, simply to wrest a fortune, the bigger the better, from defiant opportunity" (533). Yet what Newman undergoes here can rightly be called a conversion: it is a moment of transformation, dependent on a force outside Newman's own will, and it radically alters his future life: he becomes a full member of the church of capitalism. Like the elect of Puritan New England, Newman seems to confirm his election with his subsequent success.

Yet Newman loses faith in capitalism. He relates to his friend Tristram a second conversion scene occurring after he has planned to exact revenge upon a business rival by preventing him from making a profit of sixty thousand dollars in the stock market. Newman falls asleep in a hack cab and then:

"... I woke up suddenly, from a sleep or from a kind of a reverie, with the most extraordinary feeling in the world—a mortal disgust for the thing I was going to do. It came upon me like that!"—and he snapped his fingers—"as abruptly as an old wound that begins to ache. I could n't tell the meaning of it; I only felt that I loathed the whole business and wanted to wash my hands of it. The idea of losing that sixty thousand dollars, of letting it utterly slide and scuttle and never hearing of it again, seemed the sweetest thing in the world. And all this took place quite independently of my will, and I sat watching it as if it were a play at the theatre. I could feel it going on inside of me. You may depend upon it that there are things going on inside of us that we understand mighty little about." (536)

After giving up this bit of business, Newman drives out to the country (on Long Island), and feels that he has undergone a conversion: "I seemed to feel a new man inside my old skin, and I longed for a new world" (536-37). He
finds this new world in the Old World. This conversion scene touches on a number of important Jamesian themes that recur in the later fiction. Firstly, the decision, like the earlier conversion to capitalism, takes place independently of Newman’s will. Secondly, James compares the moral transformation to the experience of watching a play and thus emphasizes the unconscious activity of a moral sense that cannot be controlled. In so doing, he introduces the theme of “double consciousness,” whereby the conscious self seems to be a mere spectator observing the actions of the unconscious self (compare to The Ambassadors 1: 5). Finally, the comparison of his disgust for stock trading with “an old wound that begins to ache” suggests repression and its traumatic effects. Yet this transformation leaves Newman without even the faith in money that he had acquired on the road to San Francisco.

The conversion narratives serve to explain Newman’s motivation in coming to Europe. James claims that

[Newman] was a man to whom, sooner or later, the question [of what to do with his money] was sure to present itself, and the answer to it belongs to our story. A vague sense that more answers were possible than his philosophy had hitherto dreamt of had already taken possession of him.... (533-34)

Yet, in fact, Newman finds few such answers during his stay in Europe. In later novels, beginning with The Portrait of a Lady, and including The Princess Casamassima, the protagonist’s “inward revolution” (Literary Criticism 2: 1097) seems to result from an encounter with Europe. In The American, the plot works the other way around: when Newman arrives in Europe, he has already undergone his inward revolution. As early as 1918, the critic Joseph Warren Beach complained that “There is no revelation of anything through Newman’s consciousness—nothing depends upon his understanding. There is in fact no spiritual dilemma. That is why the book is not among the greatest of its author’s....” (qtd. in Cargill 435). This limitation results from the fact that most of the spiritual action takes place either before the book opens or in its final chapter. The novel is narrated from Newman’s perspective (Newman serves as “focalizer” or “reflector”), but he tends to think more about the people he sees and the problem of how to marry Mme. de Cintre than about his own values. As James says of the anecdotes Newman tells Mrs. Tristram about his past, “Newman’s own emotions were but scantily chronicled” (544). James thus makes the conversion scenes described in the second chapter, and a miniature auto-machia described in the fifth, the main source for our understanding of Newman’s attitude toward Europe. All of the subtly changing perceptions of an Isabel Archer or a Lambert Strether are reduced to these few spiritual crises about which Newman is not terribly articulate. They suggest, however, that Newman’s ultimate doubts about himself bear the marks of the American past, with its emphasis on the depravity of the individual, the demand for utter self-
control, and the importance of a corporate national identity as part of God's elect.

These conversions suggest the roots of Newman's experience in Protestant spiritual practices. In an illuminating discussion of *The American*’s representation of Catholicism, Edwin Fussell has suggested classing the novel among James’s “narratives of Catholic conversion” because Newman nearly allies himself to a Catholic family (79). Yet Fussell does not mention the two conversion narratives, each of which bears more in common with Protestant conceptions of conversion than Catholic ones. What marks these conversions as Protestant is their highly personal and immediate character, the direct intervention of the supernatural force in the first narrative, and the utter absence of any institutional framework for the conversion. If James’s description of Newman’s ethical values resembles Weber’s analysis of the worldly asceticism that underlies capitalist practice, the conversion scenes seem to prefigure the thought of another contemporary social-scientific investigator of religious belief, James’s brother William. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James would catalogue the notable characteristics of conversion: the intervention of a “higher helper,” a radical change in the individual’s “habitual centre of his personal energy,” the sense of a “complete division” between the old life and the new, and the resulting sense of assurance (203, 196, 217, 248). William’s account of conversion relies heavily on Protestant sources, notably Bunyan. Conversion is a particularly important phenomenon for William James because it raises the possibility of unconscious mental processes and the existence of what he calls “extra-marginal” phenomena of consciousness (234).

Both Henry and William James manifested an interest in unconscious processes of thought, of which conversion is, for William, a prominent example. Henry writes of “the unconscious cerebration of sleep” in *The Aspern Papers* (318), and William explicitly states that his interest in the phenomenon of conversion relates to the problem of “unconscious cerebration” (207). We may recognize an echo here of Christopher Newman’s comment to Tristram: “You may depend upon it that there are things going on inside of us that we understand mighty little about.” Newman’s conversions, then, limited though they are in their ultimate effects, seem to gesture towards a realm of unconscious mental activity that he never quite manages to control.

The interest of both James brothers in the phenomenon of conversion probably owed much to their father Henry James, Sr.'s own “vastation” or conversion to Swedenborgianism, which took place in 1844. Henry Sr. gives an account of the vastation in *Society the Redeemed Form of Man*, published in 1879, three years after *The American*: “To all appearance it was a perfectly insane and abject terror, without ostensible cause, and only to be accounted for, to my perplexed imagination, by some damned shape squatting invisible to me within the precincts of the room, and raying out from his fetid personality influences fatal to life” (45). William James cites the passage in a footnote to
The Varieties of Religious Experience (161). It reads rather like some of Henry James, Jr.’s later ghost stories, such as “The Jolly Corner.” Newman himself, of course, unlike John Marcher or Spencer Brydon, prefers not to contemplate the source of his own haunting. Yet if the supernatural visits Newman only briefly, in the form of the devil, his internal conflicts throughout the novel bear a certain resemblance to the experiences of an older class of converts, the New England Puritans, a group from which Benjamin Franklin was all too eager to emancipate himself.11

The Puritan churches in New England made conversion, and a duly related narrative of the conversion experience, a prerequisite for membership. The truly elect, or “visible saints,” were believed to have experienced certain manifestations of “saving faith” that would include the sort of radical self-doubt Newman briefly experiences twice in The American (Morgan 70-72, 113). After conversion, however, the Puritan could count on no extended period of comforting assurance of God’s grace. Rather, as Edmund Morgan has emphasized, crucial to a true conversion was the fact that the convert would afterwards live in a state of continual doubt as to whether God had really chosen him or whether the conversion experience itself was an illusion sent by the devil. To be unduly certain of one’s own election would be “false assurance,” a form of damnation (Morgan 70). As Sacvan Bercovitch has shown, a central element of the resulting struggle was auto-machia, also called by the Puritans “Self Civil War” (19). In this civil war within the self, those portions of the self associated with the soul, and therefore with God, continually struggled to master those portions known simply as “self,” and associated with such words as “self-affection, self-confident, self-credit, self-fullness, self-honor, self-intended, self-practice, self-safety, self-sufficiency” (17). Many of these words, of course, had a positive resonance in Franklin’s eighteenth and Newman’s nineteenth centuries (as they do today), but for the Puritans they were anathema. As Bercovitch observes, in the Puritans’ writings, “self-examination serves not to liberate but to constrict; selfhood appears as a state to be overcome, obliterated; and identity is asserted through an act of submission to a transcendent absolute” (13). Bercovitch’s detailed discussion of the trope of auto-machia and Mitchell Breitweiser’s interpretation of Franklin’s reversal of Puritan values suggest how the “massive effort at control which [Puritan] soul-searchings represent” (Bercovitch 23) could be transformed from an effort to destroy the self in service of the soul into a more recognizably modern attempt to subject the unruly portions of the self to the control of the approved, calculating part of the self that Benjamin Franklin would later champion. Newman is heir to this psychology of the divided self. He believes in rational self-control and wise investment of one’s resources, but he continually experiences the rebellion of parts of the self that do not seem willing to submit to such control.
James represents Newman as an heir to Franklin, but the older history of American conceptions of the self represented by the Puritan idea of *auto-machia* resonates throughout *The American*. Despite Newman’s lack of characteristic Jamesian interiority, the novel does play out a version of *auto-machia*. In the novel’s fifth chapter, the civil war within the self is externalized in the figures of the Unitarian minister Babcock and the English journalist whom Newman meets as he travels around Europe. James uses these two minor characters to sketch in Newman’s spiritual status. Babcock, in whom William James recognized a portrait of himself, admonishes Newman to remember that “Life and Art are extremely serious,” and accuses him of having a “relish for mere amusement” that is “almost cynical” (581-82). James assures us that Newman and Babcock are “as different as possible.” Babcock attempts “to exert an influence upon him, to try to quicken his moral life and sharpen his sense of duty” (577). The narrator’s commentary on Newman during his time with Babcock suggests a real absence of “spiritual starch” in our American hero, but the description of him as an “unregulated epicure” comes to us mainly from Babcock’s point of view and does not entirely jibe with the story of Newman’s earlier conversions (578). Indeed, Newman takes Babcock’s criticism to heart, if only “for a good half hour,” as he feels “rebuked and depressed.” Newman then sends Babcock a memorable gift, an ivory statuette of a “gaunt, ascetic-looking monk,” with a “fat capon” hanging from his waist, visible through a rent in his gown. The narrator denies that the statuette forms a “satire upon Babcock’s own asceticism” and instead suggests that it might symbolize Newman’s own difficulties in achieving the requisite self-denial (582). Read in the light of Weber’s later theories, the statuette seems an ironic commentary on that worldly asceticism that I take Newman to embody. The medieval monk presented a face of asceticism, but was able to enjoy some fleshly pleasures in secret. The modern practitioner of capitalism gives every appearance of enjoying his plenty, but, because of the need to manage his desires and impulses, still feels like an ascetic underneath his colorful robes. At any rate, the encounter with Babcock serves to recall to Newman the Puritan suspicion of beauty and this world that Europe might threaten to efface in him. As in the passage about the haircloth shirt quoted earlier, Newman demonstrates that he understands the appeal of self-denial, a lesson that prepares him for his final struggle.

If the Babcock incident suggests the impotent voice of the American’s Puritan origins trying to set Newman on the path of righteousness, his next travelling companion criticizes him from the opposite perspective. In a letter to Mrs. Tristram in Paris, Newman relates how he later met up with an English journalist. Having been called a cynic by Babcock, Newman is on the other hand warned of being “too stern a moralist” and judging things “like a Methodist” by the Englishman. Newman’s association here with Methodism resonates with his conversion experiences. Methodism, like Puritan congregationalism, made
conversion a central experience of Christian worship. In 1876 the Methodist church was in the midst of a great postbellum revival (Ahlstrom 816-19). The journalist accuses Newman of being “cursed with a conscience” (586). It is clear that Newman generally wears his conscience lightly, but the religious terms in which the opposing criticisms of his conduct are made show that, even if he prefers to think about his “Madonnas and church-steeples” from a purely aesthetic point of view, old American religious controversies dog him on his grand tour (585). After relating these criticisms of his spiritual character, Newman writes to Mrs. Tristram: “Which of my two critics was I to believe? I did n’t worry about it and very soon made up my mind they were both idiots” (586). Auto-machia here seems reduced to a harmless, even laughable tendency to introspection that the healthy American wisely shrugs off. Newman allegedly becomes aware of beauty and of values in life other than those of stockbrokers, but he encounters little to challenge his own self-assurance until after the final rebuff of the Bellegardes and the subsequent death of Valentin.

The need to confront the buried parts of the self, indeed, becomes more pressing in the final phase of the novel. Its gothic twists transform Newman’s sense of horror at the Bellegardes’ treatment of him into a tangible plot. In this sense, the alleged horrors of the old marquis’s deathbed resemble the gothic fantasies of Catherine Morland in Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey. They create a literary and criminal analogue to the feeling of horror with which Newman regards his prospective in-laws. Of course, in Northanger Abbey the gothic plot is a mere fantasy, whereas in The American, the plot “really” happens, but the focus in The American too is on Newman’s awed reaction to the servant Mrs. Bread’s relation of the Bellegardes’ “odd secrets” (621). James figures him as a reader: “Newman made a movement as if he were turning over the page of a novel” (813). Indeed, James never tells us exactly how the old Marquis died. Mrs. Bread surmises that the Marquise killed him with her eyes: “it was with the terrible strong will she put into them. It was like a frost on flowers” (819). James uses the language of spiritual crisis to describe Newman’s reaction both to his rejection by the Bellegardes and to Mrs. Bread’s revelations. At one point, in the midst of it, Newman resembles a Miltonic Satan; he complains that the Bellegardes have “pushed me into this bottomless pit, where I lie howling and gnashing my teeth!” (806-07). The episode of the Marquis’s death serves, from a spiritual perspective, mainly to create an occasion for one further act in Newman’s struggle with himself: his decision about whether or not to publish the damning evidence of the Bellegardes’ misdeeds.

Into this one episode of the possible blackmail are telescoped all of Newman’s crucial moral decisions and his reflections on his cultural values.14 The conflict with the Bellegardes repeats on a different level the conversion scene in which Newman decides to let his business rival have the sixty thousand dollars. After Newman threatens the Bellegardes with exposure, he goes to the
house of the old duchess, intending to relate his tale, but instead undergoes another inward revolution:

A singular feeling came over him—a sudden sense of the folly of his errand. What under the sun had he to say to the duchess, after all? Wherein would it profit him to tell her that the Bellegardes were traitors and that the old lady, into the bargain, was a murderess? He seemed morally to have turned a sort of somersault, and to find things looking differently in consequence. (849-50)

Here, Newman's inward revolution is figured acrobatically as a moral somersault. Despite this further change of heart, Newman continues to see himself as "a good fellow wronged" (864). Finally, however, having visited America and returned to Europe, he sits "out of the world" in Notre Dame and determines to give up his piece of paper:

He gave a groan as he remembered what he had meant to do; he was annoyed at having meant to do it; the bottom, suddenly, had fallen out of his revenge. Whether it was Christian charity or unregenerate good nature—what it was, in the background of his soul—I don't pretend to say; but Newman's last thought was that of course he would let the Bellegardes go. (868)

This passage raises an unusual theological question that the narrator refuses to answer—whether the disposition of Newman's soul rests ultimately on "Christian charity or unregenerate good nature." From a secular perspective, unregenerate good nature may seem quite good enough, but of course from the perspective of radical Protestantism it is insufficient.

As Duban has argued, James's notion of disinterestedness seems deeply shaped by a Protestant inheritance in which "true" virtue must be distinguished from apparent virtue, which is really only motivated by self-regard. Henry James, Sr. was to write three years later in Society the Redeemed Form of Man that "civilization has had no other providential mission than gradually to socialize the human consciousness, by thoroughly demonstrating the vanity of all human pretension, the vice that is latent in all our virtue, the selfseeking that underlies and arms our fiercest piety, the love of dominion that animates our loving-kindness even, and turns it often to cruel tyranny" (408; see also Duban 124-200). Newman may believe in his own virtue, but if so he is only failing to understand his true vice. If Newman's good works are to count for anything to the Puritan or to the Edwardsian or even perhaps to Henry James, Sr., they must arise solely from faith—and hence from Christian charity—not from any quality of Newman's own. Although the passage about Newman's charity may seem of minor importance, its reference to Newman's "soul" is telling. Also striking is the narrator's attempt to disclaim knowledge about Newman—"I don't pretend to say." Frequently in The American (unlike the later novels), James intervenes to tell the reader things that his protagonist
cannot know. Also quite often the narrator explicitly disclaims knowledge of a character's motives. In this particular case, this act of disclaiming has a theological significance. James seems to be saying that it is not for the narrator, and perhaps not for the reader either, to judge Newman's soul. Who the ultimate judge can be—Newman himself or God—is a question James leaves open.\(^15\)

This apparently final decision of Newman's to "let the Bellegardes go" leads directly to his burning the evidence in the presence of Mrs. Tristram. Once the paper is "quite consumed," Mrs. Tristram comments to Newman that the Bellegardes' failure to give in to his demands resulted, ultimately, from their confidence "not in their innocence, nor in their talent for bluffing things off," but in Newman's "remarkable good nature!" (871-72). The first edition of the novel ends with Newman's reaction: "Newman instinctively turned to see if the little paper was in fact consumed; but there was nothing left of it" (872). As Robert Pippin has noted, Newman's second thought here throws into relief the question of his motivation in burning the evidence. Is he really acting out of generosity or merely trying to enhance his self-esteem? (20). The question of his "good nature" adds a further turn of the screw to this problem. On the one hand, the Bellegardes believe that Newman's remarkable good nature makes them safe, but on the other hand his "instinctive" response to this proposition is to think of rescuing the burning paper. The novel thus leaves open the question of Newman's true "nature": generous or vindictive, renouncing or acquisitive. In the New York Edition, James leaves out the final comment of Mrs. Tristram and Newman's response, thus apparently softening his view of Newman. Mrs. Tristram instead tells Newman that she likes him as he is, and then comments with pity on the fate of "poor Claire," a reference to a famously ascetic group of nuns (American NYE 540).\(^16\)

Turning again to a theological perspective, one might rephrase the question of Newman's character in the following way: does Newman truly belong to the elect? In the language of the Puritans, is he a "visible saint"? From a strictly Puritanical perspective, of course, Newman clearly has failed to experience "saving faith." His conversion experiences were short-lived and, though they may have instilled in him something like a conviction of sin, they surely have not brought him to God's way. But if the doctrine of election is extended, as it has been in American myths of national identity, to the secular realm, then it may be fair to ask whether Newman, as representative American, belongs among the chosen people. The doctrine of election, so central both to Puritanism and to the Calvinism of James's grandfather, creates, as Weber, Bercovitch, and Morgan have shown, an immense tension in the lives of those who claim to be elect. Newman never explicitly makes such a claim, but the national assumption of chosenness seems to underlie his confidence in American values. The stress in such a belief results from the possibility of "false assurance." After a conversion experience, the Puritan had to maintain continued self-doubt in order not to be guilty of falsely assuming that he or she
had been saved. As Morgan puts it of the Puritans, "in order to be sure one must be unsure" (70).

After going to Europe and encountering a complex system of mores for which their own straightforward ethical beliefs seem unable to account, James's later heroes and heroines frequently lose their certainty of election and become skeptical of their own ascetic tendencies. The American is the story of a member of the American elect who has apparently forgotten about the existence of God's grace. Newman's admirable qualities—his good nature—certainly make him an appealing character. Yet his tendency to materialism diminishes him in the reader's eyes. Of the evidence against the Bellegardes, Newman says, "I want it to be my property and no one else's!" (816). There is no doubt that James criticizes such acquisitiveness as a typically American failing. Yet James distinctly refuses us access to Newman's soul. The Bellegardes' betrayal and the death of Valentin, for which Newman partly blames himself, are dreadful blows to Newman's characteristic self-assurance. He feels himself "in a bottomless pit" (806). His self-examination in the final chapter of the novel, though it may pale next to later Jamesian self-examinations, suggests something of the latent Puritanical urge to doubt one's own election. And yet, unlike the Isabel Archers and Lambert Strethers of James's later career, Newman seems sufficiently ensconced in his own assurance to give the reader a fairly good sense that he cannot really belong to the elect. He never doubts the Bellegardes' guilt or his own righteousness. He has every confidence that his own cultural norms are the ones that should determine others' actions. Such assurance must be false.

I have mentioned more than once the allegorical quality of The American. Instead of giving us direct access to Newman's "soul," James leaves open a mystery about the nature of the unconscious forces that cause Newman's various conversions, about the "things going on inside of us" that Newman himself cannot understand (536). Like a complex allegory, the problem of the "old wound" that begins to ache when Newman first renounces his ties to the stock market leaves itself open to many interpretations. The Puritan reader might find an incipient conviction of sin underlying Newman's malaise, although Newman himself never seems entirely to confront his own sinfulness. On a Freudian level, one may suspect a certain inability to cope with adult sexuality that first sends Newman on his quest and then contributes to his horror at his dealings with the Bellegardes and Mlle. Nioche. On a biographical level, I have already suggested the "vastation" of Henry James, Sr. in the background. The image of the "old wound" also calls up the famous "horrid even if... obscure hurt" that Henry James, Jr. suffered while fighting a fire during 1861, the first year of the Civil War. Edel has argued that that wound, frequently assumed to be a castration, was in fact an injury to the back (1: 173-90). At any rate, its moral significance for The American seems associated with James's
complicated relationship to the civil war, in which he and William did not fight but the younger brothers Wilky and Bob did.

_The American_ can perhaps too be read as an allegory of American national identity, and the _auto-machia_ or “Self Civil War” that Newman undergoes seems to echo the real civil war. Newman himself rose to the rank of Brigadier General after four years of fighting. There is some indication that, like Basil Ransom of _The Bostonians_ after him, Newman thinks of his quest for a wife as a further battle in that war. He plans to liberate Mme. de Cintré: “If you are afraid of losing your freedom, I can assure you that this freedom here, this life you now lead, is a dreary bondage to what I will offer you.... [You] ought to be perfectly free, and marriage will make you so” (631, 633). It may be remembered too that L’Étangère the play by Dumas fils to which _The American_ is at least in part a response featured an American woman whose ancestry was one-quarter African-American—a character played by Sarah Bernhardt. Of this aspect of the play, James had complained, “Why she should be an American, why she should have Negro blood, why she should be the implacable demon she is represented...all this is the perfection of mystery” (Cargill 430). That foreigner, the daughter of a mulatto slave and her master, suggests some of the divisions in the American character that may haunt Christopher Newman’s divided self. Although the question of race arises in _The American_ almost exclusively in relation to the Bellegardes—“old races have odd secrets”—it is likely that, after the Civil War, the old wounds of slavery, secession, and combat continue to haunt Newman’s status as the representative of a perfectly democratic America. If _The American_ is a novel about a man whose own spiritual status remains uncertain, who cannot decide whether he belongs among the elect, then it is also about a representative of what Abraham Lincoln called an “almost chosen people” (qtd. in Wolf 13).

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NOTES

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1. For the history of antebellum anti-Catholic stereotypes, on which James draws, see Franchot, especially her discussion of Hawthorne’s _The Marble Faun_ 350-58. It is notable that one of the most hostile early reviews appeared in _The Catholic World_. Its hostility was not specifically related to the novel’s portrayal of Catholicism, but the reviewer does complain that “There is nothing in _The American_ to improve anybody’s morals or manners” (Tuttleton 408).

2. Compare to _The American Scene_, in James's _Collected Travel Writings_ 597-98.

3. The novelist son dropped the “Jr.” from his name only after his father’s death. In this essay, I use it only when distinguishing him from his father.
In addition to the works cited above, the major critical statements concerning The American in the last twenty years have focused on three or four key issues. The relatively traditional concerns of realism vs. romance and the political resonances of the international theme have given way over the last decade or so to a number of studies focusing on gender and sexuality in the novel or more broadly on Christopher Newman’s unconscious desires. The relationship between James’s aspirations to (French-identified) realism and the romance, melodramatic, or Gothic plot of the last third of the book is the subject of Brooks, “The Turn of The American,” and Stowe. Both the French political context and the broader implications of the workings of international capitalism are considered in Rowe, “The Politics of Innocence” and Seltzer. Porter’s influential study of marriage as acquisition in the novel opened the way for a considerable number of feminist, and more recently queer theory, approaches to the novel, notably those of Silver, and Haralson. In terms of understanding gender in the novel, my reading simply emphasizes that Newman’s stereotypes about the Bellegardes and his aversion to arranged marriage belong to a tradition of anti-Catholicism. The religious aspect of Newman’s failed conversions is also relevant to attempts to understand his unconscious sexual and ideological motivations, such as Rowe, The Other Henry James 56-74. The international theme in The American has, surprisingly, received less attention in the last few years, but Blair approaches it productively from the angle of race relations and ethnography in Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation.

The first sentence of the novel identifies Newman simply as “a gentleman”; the narrator thus seems to share Newman’s democratic usage of that word (515).

Hughes notes Weber’s indebtedness to William James (321). Since William James’s thoughts on religion seem to owe something to his brother Henry, one could even argue that Henry James is an indirect source for Weber’s famous theory.

For a discussion of differences between allegory and realist fiction, and the transmutation of Puritan allegory into individualist fiction, see Watt 18-21, 80-85. James makes somewhat slighting references to allegory and to Bunyan in particular in Hawthorne (1879), LC 1: 331, 366-68.

Posnock suggests some of the links between such experiences and modernity when he writes of Newman’s “awareness of his own nonidentity” (316 n2).

Adam Verver, in The Golden Bowl, is in this respect the closest character to Newman in the later fiction.

William James also notes that the “new birth” of a conversion may be “away from religion into incredulity;...from moral scrupulosity into freedom and license; or it may be produced by the irruption into the individual’s life of some new stimulus or passion, such as love, ambition, cupidity, revenge, or patriotic devotion” (176). Newman’s first conversion is to the capitalist spirit, his second away from it.

Henry James, Sr., by the same token, was rebelling against the strict Calvinism of his own father, William James of Albany. See Edel 1: 29-40.

For William James’s reaction, see Edel 2: 259.

Torsney offers a remarkable reading of the capon (a castrated cock) as a symbol of the homoerotic desires of Newman and Babcock in “Henry James.”

Brooks writes, “we are summoned to enter a realm where the stakes have been raised, where at issue are questions of good and evil, life and death” (“Turn” 62).

Butler noted a similar refusal to explain motives at the end of Washington Square in a lecture at the American Comparative Literature Association annual conference in Boulder, Colorado in April, 2001.

The Poor Clares, founded by St. Clare and St. Francis of Assisi, “are regarded as the most austere women’s Order” in the Roman Catholic Church. A less austere branch of the order was known for some time as the “Urbanists,” after Pope Urban IV, perhaps a namesake of Claire’s father and brother, both named Urbain de Bellegarde. See Livingstone.

In “The Politics of Innocence,” Rowe suggests that James foresaw the danger of American democracy turning into imperialism and thus recasting European aristocracy (91-93).

See also Jon Butler (289-95).
WORKS CITED


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