Despite renewed interest in the ties between religion and Victorian literature, some critics still assume that evangelicalism opposed the realist novel. According to this assumption, evangelicals suspected that novel reading distracted from more pious pastimes and led particularly susceptible readers to moral dissipation. Evangelical novels existed, of course, but critics tend to dismiss them as shoddy pieces of moral didacticism wholly lacking the hallmarks of the "great" realist novel, that is, its psychological depth, multivocality, and moral complexity. Extending this line of thinking and noting the explicit hostility of authors such as Dickens, Collins, and Eliot to evangelical humbuggery, critics from György Lukács to George Levine have concluded that the Victorian realist novel is "a secular form if ever there was one" (Levine, qtd. 9).

Mark Knight corrects this stubborn narrative on two fronts. First, he sheds new light on the capaciousness of evangelicalism, demonstrating that it exemplified not ideological unity but instead a fundamental "lack of cohesion" despite the movement's occasional efforts to present itself otherwise (2). Second, he shows how "the ideas, networks, and practices of evangelicalism permeate the content of the Victorian novel" (6)---not just evangelical fiction, which Knight wisely declines to foreground here. Rather than further entrenching the (presumed) division between religious and secular novels, authors, and reading communities, Good Words seeks to bridge this gap, showing how a diverse and dynamic evangelical movement permeated mainstream literary culture.

The book's chapters, therefore, not only offer new interpretations of canonical Victorian novels such as Vanity Fair, A Tale of Two Cities, and The Moonstone. Sometimes, they also re-examine a well-established facet or characteristic of a given novel in light of evangelical themes, which in turn reveal its surprising indebtedness to an underappreciated aspect of evangelical belief or practice. For instance, chapter 1 notes that Vanity Fair "imagines reading to be work as much as pleasure [as it] challenges us to consider the effect of reading to grapple with the interpretive choices involved" (38-39). This familiar observation leads to Knight's larger argument: "the novel's focus on alerting readers to what was wrong with the world was a perspective consistent with the evangelical tradition ... They knew, in other words, that things were not always as they seemed" (44). Knight thus furnishes enriched ways of linking Victorian evangelicalism to prominent and seemingly "secular" features of much-loved novels.

This does not mean that Knight aims only to show how the would-be "secular" features of the Victorian novel become "evangelical" once historically contextualized within Victorian evangelicalism. This is just one of his aims. In chapter 1, for instance, Knight argues that evangelicals often saw skepticism not as a threat to the "evangelical tradition" but instead a "sign of religious conscience," particularly in the "dissenting Calvinist manifestation of evangelicalism" (46). But other chapters seek less to correct the historical record than to explain affordances of evangelical forms or the limits of "suspicious" literary critique.

Turning, for instance, to A Tale of Two Cities and Dickens's "conductorship" of All the Year Round, chapter 2 argues that Dickens actually valued conversion narratives. Despite his frustration with the "narrowness and closure of certain evangelical ideas," we are told, he nevertheless "sympathized with the vision of narrative unity modeled by evangelical accounts of conversion and valued its capacity for articulating an ambitious redemptive vision that could deal with the chaos of the modern age" (66). Specifically, Knight explains, the conversion narrative supplied a formal model with which Dickens could register the centrifugal chaos of the French Revolution--"its growing "incoherence and disorder" (69)--while eventually becoming centripetal: "unifying these disparate and unwieldy elements by the story of one man's personal regeneration.

Moreover, this formal aspect of the conversion narrative inspired Dickens's editorial strategy in overseeing All the Year Round. With its "liturgical intimations" and effort to take on a "priestly or preacher-like role," the periodical bore a debt to evangelical practices even as it positioned itself to "rival the religious story [evangelicals] told" (71).

Chapter 3 has more to say about periodicals. Using Good Words as its case study, it problematizes Mark Turner's claim that "the sacred and secular are discrete and that there was little crossover between religious and nonreligious markets" (qtd. 84-85). In fact, Knight argues, in their effort to fulfill the divine mission "to make the gospel known in all its fullness," evangelical periodicals and religious fiction writers appealed to broad readerships (102). Yet evangelicalism struggled to reconcile conflicting aims, to make its message both straightforward (thus incapable of being misinterpreted) and broadly appealing by way of diverse literary forms. In the case of Good Words, the latter aim is said to have partly...
entailed the “dissolution of evangelical identity” as an “enlarged view of the gospel risked extending that story of salvation beyond the limits of a strictly evangelical theology” (102).

Chapters 4 and 5 respectively, link The Moonstone to Victorian hermeneutics and The Way of All Flesh to modern literary criticism. Citing two modes of interpretation—the “plain sense school favored by evangelicalism and the pseudoscientific hermeneutic employed by German higher criticism” such as that of Betteredge and Cuff—chapter 4 argues that The Moonstone ultimately rejects both of them in favor of another evangelical mode of reading: the “communal tradition of applied interpretation that valued contributions from those who were not educated and encouraged modes of thought that were not purely isolated attempts at theological reconstruction” (135).

This analysis of “communal” interpretation anticipates the concerns of chapter 5. As the most experimental chapter of the book, it takes its cue from Rita Felski’s The Limits of Critique, which calls for “postcritical” modes of reading that reflect how we are “always already entangled, mediated, connected, interdependent, intertwined”—that is, not detached but unavoidably “well-attached” (146). Applying this point to prominent readings of The Way of All Flesh, Knight finds that modern literary criticism has trouble comprehending religion and religious commitments. Paradoxically, Knight notes, even as critics recognize the narrator Overton’s flawed perspective, they have nevertheless credited him with capturing something “essentially true” about evangelicalism (147). This widespread critical acceptance of Overton’s reliability, Knight speculates, springs from the fact that Overton takes the same default stance as most literary critics, i.e. one of profound detachment from the subject matter being analyzed.

The critical reception of The Way of All Flesh leads Knight to a broader meditation on religion and the commitments of postcriticism. Literary criticism today, Knight contends, “makes the mistake of trying to detach the reader from the material that he or she is seeking to understand,” an attitude that ultimately inhibits literary critics from “making sense of the Christian religion” (140, 156). “From a critically ironic vantage point,” he maintains, “belief and emotion seem too trusting and too caught up in immediate moment to offer adequate opportunities for thought” (157). Hence critics’ reflexive assumption that evangelical religiosity must incapacitate “true” judgment or reason. Hence, too, the under-appreciation of a primary tenet of Christianity, “particularly in its evangelical form, [that] no one is immune from the sort of judgment that we practice in the name of critique—for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (157). In a concluding section aptly titled “My Story,” Knight boldly shares his personal religious journey, disclosing how his own experiences inform and enrich his scholarship. For those interested in what postcriticism might look like in practice, this final section offers a compelling example.

In making its arguments, Good Words steers clear of what it calls “two potential dead ends” for the analysis of evangelicalism in Victorian literature: it treats neither British imperialism nor George Eliot. As Knight rightly notes, both avenues of inquiry are already well trod. First, as I’ve noted in my own scholarship, critics overwhelmingly construe the “evangelical commitment to mission [solely] through the movement’s collusion with imperialism” (14). Second, the glut of attention paid to Eliot means she is too often perceived as offering the most fair and balanced view of the social effects of evangelical belief. According to Jon Singleton, however, whom Knight quotes, Eliot’s “empirical, critical method for testing the effects of faith” reflects less the practices and beliefs of evangelicalism than the default preferences and tendencies of (secular) literary criticism today (qtd. 19).

Nevertheless, it is surely an overstatement to call these two topics—imperialism and Eliot—“potential dead ends.” As Knight himself acknowledges in regard to evangelicalism and imperialism, critics such as William Mckelvy (writing on The Moonstone) have shown that critical awareness of larger global forces need not subsume critical attention to theology. Indeed, it’s not clear why “creating new paths for our thoughts about evangelicalism and the novel means avoiding paradigms that have often resulted in evangelicals being painted as boogeymen” (16, emphasis mine). I realize, of course, that the scope of a book must be limited. Yet given how much global conflicts inform the novels examined, I wonder if Knight’s close readings would have been strengthened by a more flexible distinction between the “overseas” and “domestic” (15). Similarly, I hoped that the rationale for omitting Eliot might be revisited in the final chapter, which compellingly critiques how “Anglo-American departments of literature share [The Way of All Flesh’s] commitment to critical irony” (151). According to Knight, Eliot and Butler do more to reveal the default tendencies of critics today than the role of evangelicalism in the Victorian era. For instance, both attract critical interest insofar as they “examin[e] faith from the outside,” “rejecting the possibility that this particular expression of the church might prove capable of speaking to contemporary literature” (20). But if I understand Knight’s implicit arguments correctly, it is precisely Eliot’s sympathy for and closeness to evangelicalism that is more likely to lead to critical “dead ends” than Overton’s overt detachment from the subject. Eliot’s seductiveness in this regard is fascinating to me, and for that reason I would have loved to see Knight extend his postcritical analysis to comparing Butler and Eliot: comparing Overton’s ironic detachment with the differences, implications, and potential pitfalls that attend a “secular critique” based on Eliot’s “cosmopolitan sympathy.”

By notable coincidence, Knight’s book has appeared almost simultaneously with another major book on evangelicalism and the Victorian novel, Christopher Herbert’s Evangelical Gothic (Virginia, 2019). While I cannot adequately discuss Herbert’s book here, I recommend reading it along with Knight’s, which not only contests what Herbert endorses (the idea that evangelicalism opposed the novel) but also provides some corrective to a few of Herbert’s claims. Nevertheless, these two books together significantly revise our critical understanding of the content and impact of Victorian evangelicalism. They both broaden our understanding of what evangelicalism encompassed, shaking loose seemingly ironclad links between evangelicalism and moral earnestness in one instance (Herbert 13-14) as well as between evangelicalism and its supposed investment in the “extreme transcendence” of worldly concerns in another (Knight 32). Although Herbert seeks to reframe rather than expand our understanding of evangelicalism (in contrast to Knight), the end results of both studies strike me as similar. Together, they show how much evangelicalism shaped the Victorian novel and newly estrange us from what we think we know about nineteenth-century manifestations of evangelical faith.

Since Knight is a luminary in the field of religion and Victorian literature, it is a pleasure to be guided by his expert voice through evangelical theology, postcriticism, religious periodicals, and the Victorian novel. An eminently accessible and generous book, Good Words goes a long way toward explaining why evangelicalism mattered and why it still matters today.

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