



DAMNING FUNDAMENTALISM: SINCLAIR LEWIS AND THE TRIALS OF FICTION

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But the question remains: why, at a moment when religious and religiously tinged conflicts are erupting around the globe and shaping US policy both domestically and internationally, has the discourse on religion and the appropriate education of students for citizenship come to be dominated almost entirely by the issues debated eighty years ago in the Scopes trial?

—Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*

At the heart of America's battles between religion and science lies a simplistic but persistent epistemology. Critiqued from a wide range of disciplinary angles, but still regularly deployed by scientists, clergy, and others, this ideology of objectivity assumes that human beings can neutrally access a certain, provable knowledge—whether about God or the cosmos—that exists without any regard for interpretive position.¹ It is equally endemic to school district battles over biology curricula, door-to-door and media-based proselytism, atheistic pronouncements about religious delusions, and, in a post-9/11 world beset by school and university massacres, even the martyr videos of various suicides. Indeed the ugly face it puts on religion sometimes tempts one to regard all references to matters of ultimate concern or the transcendent as inherently antihumanist. Doing so, however, requires us to pretend that absolutism in the United States is entirely

a religious phenomenon and not also a reactionary legacy of modernism. Concentrating on literary and cultural developments of the 1920s, this article instead indicates that there has long been as much blurring as friction between US religion and science. Beginning with the famous Scopes Monkey Trial, I point out the irony that various modernists critiqued fundamentalists for an absolutism they in fact shared, and I argue that, regardless of whether they realized it, Clarence Darrow, Sinclair Lewis, and H. L. Mencken were concerned less with religion per se than with religion presenting itself as a knowledge independent of prior assumptions.

While I will be using literature to make an argument about a particular moment in American history, I also want to demonstrate how distinguishing between presumptions of religious certainty and a self-jeopardizing, less comfortable faith might transform readings of "secular" texts. Taking as my central example Lewis's 1927 best-seller, *Elmer Gantry*, and reading it against *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and especially *Arrowsmith*, I outline the celebrated debunker's aversion to religious absolutism and his enthusiasm for scientific research. To this extent Lewis belongs on the side of the modernists, and indeed *Elmer Gantry* has often been reduced to a polemical assault on popular religion. However, read with a more careful eye to historical context and narrative structure, Lewis's work also epitomizes literature's capacity to open pathways beyond our culture's binary tendencies. While sharply criticizing many facets of early-twentieth-century Protestantism, Lewis's best novels search for a way of being in the world that also opposes technology-driven capitalism, and they astutely critique science's tendency to become its own pursuit of transcendence. Perhaps surprisingly, when engaged with this awareness, *Elmer Gantry* opens space for a non-dogmatic, openly subjective faith by exposing the fear of risk that regularly characterizes religious and secular rhetoric alike. Recognizing this possibility via fiction requires special attention to the way Lewis's sentences, paragraphs, and chapters proceed via a strategy of intentional self-contradiction that shifts from realism into satire. Approaching Lewis's work with an eye to functional rather than merely substantive religion—practice, not just doctrine—I ultimately aim to widen vistas onto both religious and scientific pursuits of knowledge in modern US fiction and culture.

My approach to Tracy Fessenden's question about the enduring tie between American religion and an eighty-year-old Tennessee court battle, then, begins with the atmosphere of religious and scientific absolutism in which evolutionary theory first gained lasting, nationwide attention in the popular media. It is rarely remembered that many late-nineteenth-century Protestant reactions to Darwin's ideas were quite positive and that the growing fear of science in the



Fig. 1. William Jennings Bryan (seated at left) being interrogated by Clarence Seward Darrow during the trial of State of Tennessee vs. John Thomas Scopes, July 20, 1925. Photograph by Watson Davis. Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7901, image #2005-26002.

late 1910s and early 1920s, although closely related to fundamentalism, was by no means an exclusively Christian or even a religious phenomenon.² Emerging from World War I with new international prominence, US traditionalists were primed to associate any form of intellectual complexity with the dual German threat of imperialist ambition and higher biblical criticism. The Scopes trial gradually came to epitomize that reactionary attitude because of both the media carnival it occasioned and the dramatizations it inspired, such as the 1955 play *Inherit the Wind*, its 1960 film adaptation, and three subsequent television adaptations. These fictionalizations, by which most Americans now encounter the trial, so emphasize the fundamentalist-led prosecution's hunger for popular adulation that they mask the defense's shared reliance on an absolute objectivism. I will not closely examine the entire trial or the writings of its main players, but only point out several instances when the terms "faith" and "belief" were equated with a purported certainty. For instance, William Jennings Bryan, the most famous of the prosecutors, was terrified that "more than half [of American scientists] do not believe there is a God or personal immortality, and they want to teach that to these children, and take that from them, to take from them their

belief" (Scopes 178). There was little room for individual agency in this "belief," just as there was none in Bryan's insistence that he did not write "interpretations" of the Bible, but only "comments on the lesson" (284).³

Perhaps more surprising than a fundamentalist's repression of subjectivity, though, is defense lawyer Clarence Darrow's barely more complex position. During the trial he treated faith as fanciful speculation about the unknowable, an irrelevance synonymous with opinion or superstition. "[Humanity] finds out what [it] can and yearns to know more and supplements [its] knowledge with hope and faith," he averred (Scopes 78). In other words, for Darrow, faith was a mere placeholder awaiting real knowledge, and therefore a mere distraction.

Admittedly, scholars who have undertaken a full reading of the trial transcript might demur slightly, since Darrow occasionally ribbed Bryan that "I do not pretend to know where many ignorant men are sure" (Scopes 99). Objection sustained: whereas 1920s fundamentalism regarded doubt as evidence of a heathen nature, modernists like Darrow understood its methodological necessity. Fellow defense lawyer Dudley Field Malone even went so far as to recognize the role of interpretation in reading Scripture in translation, something that Bryan never seemed to have pondered. However, even Darrow and Malone stopped short of accepting any ultimate epistemological uncertainty. Darrow insisted on careful, logical arguments, but he assumed that gray areas in questions about human origins and the existence of God could eventually be eliminated. While contemporary readers (or viewers) may want to hear in this champion of the dispossessed (or his fictional counterpart Drummond) a postmodern sense of the inescapability of subjectivity, neither the real Darrow nor other representatives of 1920s modernism like Mencken actually escaped the Enlightenment ideology of objective knowledge. Even if they surpassed Bryan by temporarily accepting the limits of their knowledge, their claims were hardly more humble; they still claimed positions of total neutrality. Thus twentieth-century American secularism gained further momentum, with modernists joining fundamentalists to demand not just knowledge, but knowledge untainted by faith, subjectivity, or prior assumptions of any kind.

Darrow's and Mencken's essays are particularly notable examples of modernism's proclivity to criticize fundamentalism for shortcomings it does not recognize in itself. In a 1932 autobiography, for example, Darrow criticized Bryan's legacy because "his speculations had ripened into unchangeable convictions. He did not think. He knew" (*Story* 277). By contrast, he proclaims, "I have discovered how easy it is to induce one to believe something that he wishes to

believe. I am so sure of this, that if I am really anxious to have one believe something I spend most of my time in an effort to make him want to believe, and he will do the rest without any help from me" (399). The problem is that even here, on the very cusp of recognizing subjectivity's foundational role in knowledge, Darrow exempts himself, as if there were nothing that he too "wishe[d] to believe." Resorting to the same absolutism he deplored, Darrow exclaims, "if it is not *certain* that death ends personal identity and memory, then almost nothing that [humanity] accepts as true is susceptible of *proof*" ("Myth" 418; emphasis added). Furthermore, he continues, "everyone *knows* that there is no real evidence of any such state of bliss [as heaven]" (419; emphasis added). His use of a train-riding illustration signaled this tendency even more evocatively and gives us additional reason to align 1920s fundamentalism and modernism. The heralded lawyer explains that "whenever I go across a high trestle or a long span of steel and cement in Switzerland, or any other section of the Alps, and look down out of a car-window a thousand or more feet below, I am quite certain that I am sustained by something besides faith" (*Story* 386). But is this illustration really about avoiding faith or about replacing its traditional, divine object with a modern, technological one?

A similar mixture of insight and denial characterized Mencken's highly influential journalism and literary criticism. His 1930 statement of "What I Believe" emblemized American modernists' tendency to allow a healthy procedural suspicion to harden into an ironclad anti-religious secularism. At one level, he accurately perceived that a considerable gap often exists between contemporary religious rhetoric and biblical sources like the Epistle to the Hebrews, which asserts, "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."⁴ Tellingly, though, Mencken's critique of fundamentalism is hampered by a muddled rebuke of the need for faith:

it is common to hear [the theologians] discussing (and denouncing) the beliefs of men of science as if they were mere articles of faith. The two things, of course, are quite distinct. Belief is faith in something that is known; faith is belief in something that is not known. In my own credo there are few articles of faith; in fact, I have been quite unable, in ten days and nights of prayer and self-examination, to discover a single one. (*H. L. Mencken on Religion* 37)

One may delight in this Twainian hyperbole, but it is still nonsensical to say that "belief is faith in something that is known; faith is belief in something that is not known."⁵ Belief is faith, faith is belief: what is the difference? Mencken's essays sound as if what

he actually repudiated, without quite realizing it, was neither faith nor belief, but merely religion masquerading as provable knowledge. Why else would he bother lamenting that "what ails the churches is that large numbers of them have abandoned Christianity, lock, stock and barrel" (72)? If faith truly meant nothing, why did he worry that "[hundreds of thousands of poor simpletons] look for the Ambassador of Christ, and they behold a Baptist elder in a mail-order suit, describing voluptuously the Harlot of Babylon" (77)? And if the famous skeptic insisted that "evangelical Christianity, as everyone knows, is founded upon hate," why did he add, "as the Christianity of Christ was founded upon love" (209)?

I suspect that Mencken's longing—conscious or unconscious—for a faith shorn of religious posturing had a great deal to do with his excitement about *Elmer Gantry*. While it is clear that Mencken was among Lewis's strongest advocates, it might surprise many scholars to learn that he praised the critically neglected preacher novel even more strongly than *Main Street* or *Babbitt*. For Mencken, writing just before the book's much-anticipated release, "the possible effects of *Elmer Gantry* are incalculable." Having bemoaned the relative ineffectiveness of his years spent warning America of "the Methodist dervishes" who are "deficient in both intelligence and character," he gushed,

Well, here comes Lewis with the case against them put into the form of a fable—more, a fable not too serious—an indictment in *scherzo* form. I am no prophet, but it seems to be quite possible that this simple (but far from idle!) tale may accomplish at one stroke what ten billion kilowatt hours of argument and invective have failed to accomplish. . . . For there is power in the imagination that indignation can never show. Its works enchant—and enchantment is vastly more than conviction. (*H. L. Mencken on American Literature* 128)

Maintaining a position atop the *New York Times* bestseller list for almost all of 1927, and with claims to the largest first printing of any US novel to that point, *Elmer Gantry* indeed came close to fulfilling Mencken's dreams. Like the Scopes trial, it was the focus of controversy for months to come, as angered fundamentalists not only sought to ban the novel, but also quashed dramatic adaptations on Broadway and in Cleveland. Perhaps Mencken's key question, though, is what it meant for the novel to be "a fable not too serious" that could "enchant" and not just "convict." As we will see, readers have been divided as to how accurately Lewis's combination of realism and satire reflected American reality, and this novel was his most violent admixture of all.

Religion as Technology as Capitalism

Before considering the extent of *Elmer Gantry's* verisimilitude, one needs a clear sense of the specific brands of religiosity it engaged. While Bryan and several Kansas City preachers provided models for various aspects of *Elmer Gantry's* eponymous main character and its female lead, Sharon Falconer, Lewis's most direct inspirations were the evangelists Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson.⁶ Sunday's rural tent meetings in the 1900s gradually progressed to urban tabernacle spectacles in the 1910s; the one Lewis attended on Broadway, for instance, lasted ten weeks, required an 18,000-seat building, involved over 50,000 volunteers, and brought nearly 100,000 souls rushing to the altar.⁷ At its height in the 1920s, McPherson's ministry made the bold move of abandoning traveling revivals and built a Los Angeles temple with its own radio station, which, as Tona J. Hangen details, allowed the priestess to claim over 50,000 registered members for her "church in the air" (77). While exceptional in many regards, Sunday's and McPherson's sensationalism heralded twentieth-century Protestantism's growing captivation with technological innovation, media power, and capitalist methods.

If there was any doctrine that fundamentalist preachers could agree on—beyond the laity's calling to fill clergy bank accounts—it was that doubt of any sort was heresy. One of the relatively liberal pastors who assisted Lewis's research lamented that "doubt is the one mortal sin among preachers" (Birkhead, "Sinclair" 36), and McPherson regarded it not only as "the greatest sin," but also "the cause of all the other sins" (Birkhead, "Aimee" 45). Sunday made the same assumption when he advised in an often-repeated sermon, "there is only one way to have the doubts destroyed. Read the Bible and obey it." He went on to suggest the close tie between fundamentalism's repudiation of doubt and its growing mechanization: "you say you can't understand [the Bible]. There's an A, B, C in religion, just as in everything else" (Sunday 19). This led to an appeal to modern progress as evidence of the triumph of American Christianity. Sunday's pride that the inventors of the steam engine, steamboat, and telegraph were Christians was part and parcel with his claim that "religion can be judged on the same basis of cause and effect. If you do a thing, results always come" (33).⁸

Such utilitarian celebrations indicated Protestantism's increasing acceptance of—even dependence on—capitalism and technological spectacle. In 1880, Salvation Army representatives had taken Manhattan by imitating rather than renouncing culture; as Diane Winston observes, the Army's "brass bands, colorful flags, and lively singing could have been advertisements for the latest minstrel or variety show" (17). The Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911–12



Fig. 2. However critics described Billy Sunday's preaching, they never used the epithets "boring" or "monotone." Note the cartoonist's emphasis on Sunday's hyperactive rhetoric of certain knowledge. Rpt. in William Ellis, *Billy Sunday, the Man and His Message* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1917) 149.

(a key predecessor of the 1990s Promise Keepers phenomenon) furthered religion's media investment with eighteen-foot-high billboards on Broadway. Selling churchgoing next to signs for the circus and other evening entertainments, the movement effectively portrayed religion "as an up-to-date part of a consumer-oriented world" (Bederman 444). This set the stage for Sunday's front-page newspaper scoreboards where he tallied converts made against finances expended. As the crowds grew, Sunday's commodification of the soul extended even to the altar call, where the preacher's trademark spontaneity required an increasingly rehearsed plan.⁹ As historian William McLoughlin details, this was amusingly evident when congregants would proceed forward on the wooden tabernacles' sawdust trails:

One usher seized the right arm of each approaching person from the one direction and placed the hand in Billy's right; the other usher placed the hand of the person approaching from the opposite direction in Billy's left; so Billy was continually swaying now to the right, now to the left rapidly. He gripped the upstretched hands at the rate of fifty-seven per minute and said a quick "God bless you" to each. (99)

McPherson's revivalism was no less dependent on such automatization. In one of several autobiographies, she exulted that "if any one in Los Angeles wants to know what time it is, they may merely lift the receiver from its hook, call [her] Angelus Temple, and the operator will give them the correct standard time" (252). Inside the mammoth facility, such technical wonder was no less crucial as she leaned heavily on nearby Hollywood studios for elaborate costumes, mammoth sets, and complex special effects. In one famous example, she brought a police motorcycle into the sanctuary, its siren blaring, and preached a sermon entitled, "Arrested for Speeding" (Sutton 72). But the real heart of her ministry was its five-hundred-watt radio station, capable of broadcasting across a 150-mile-radius and only the third to hit the airwaves in Los Angeles. Hangen's assessment that the radio station's novelty and technological aura "became almost an object of worship in itself" (70) is justified by McPherson's hymn of praise to her antennas: "those two arms, as if in supplication, tower in the sunlight gleaming shafts of white against an azure sky. Illuminated at night by huge floodlights, they glow with silvery radiance like vast tapers, ever burning, ever pointing starward" (qtd. in Hangen 70). For McPherson, the spires not only replaced the traditional cross-supporting steeple, but also became a veritable means of grace. If listeners would only join her beside their living room receivers, their bodily and spiritual ills could be cured by a virtual laying on of hands. Radically transposing Jesus's sobering warning about how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, but that still "for God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:24–26), McPherson triumphantly announced to her comfortable suburban audience, "these are the days of invention! The days when the impossible has become possible!" (qtd. in Hangen 65).

With such exhibitions regularly gracing the headlines and his friends Mencken and Darrow leaping at every chance for ridicule, it is not surprising that a novelist as satirically talented as Lewis would smell an inviting target. The prominence of figures like Sunday and McPherson—both of whom sent Bryan telegrams of encouragement during the Scopes trial—clearly motivated Lewis to write a preacher novel, just as he had written a businessman novel in *Babbitt* and a scientist novel in *Arrowsmith*. What Lewis's adoption of such thematic foci has overshadowed in criticism to date, however, is that

skewering fundamentalist religion was a priority in *all* of his major novels. As T. K. Whipple recognized in 1928, "The intellectual life . . . is not the worst sufferer in the society Lewis deals with. The other human activities fare no better; and of them all probably none is so debased as religion" (73). Consider that in *Main Street* Guy Pollock remarks, "I went to a denominational college and learned that since dictating the Bible, and hiring a perfect race of ministers to explain it, God has never done much but creep around and try to catch us disobeying it" (173).¹⁰ An exceedingly pious chair of the Ladies Aid Society similarly witnesses to the haplessness of the churches when she assures Carol Kennicott in all seriousness that the various denominations will eventually unite to change society for the better—most likely within three or four decades! *Babbitt* likewise features barely-camouflaged references to Sunday, who was a former professional baseball player, in the prize-fighter-turned-preacher Mike Monday, "the world's greatest salesman of salvation" (101). The novel even more sharply ridicules the Reverend John Jennison Drew, who while praying beside Babbitt at the novel's end, "glance[s] at his watch as he concluded with a triumphant, 'And let him never be afraid to come to Us for counsel and tender care, and let him know that the church can lead him as a little lamb'" (403).

Such sentimental self-deification left Lewis nauseous, but he was interested in more than just unmasking the Jim Bakkers and Ted Haggards of his time. He sensed that shallow religiosity was exacting a devastating toll on the nation's intellectual culture throughout the week, not just on Sunday mornings. Will Kennicott of *Main Street* epitomizes the problem: "he believed in the Christian religion, and never thought about it; he believed in the church, and seldom went near it; he was shocked by Carol's lack of faith, and wasn't quite sure what was the nature of the faith that she lacked" (347). The costs of such unexamined dependence emerge when Babbitt scans a newspaper article about a pastor who became a politician and "searched for an attitude, but neither as a Republican, a Presbyterian, an Elk, nor a real-estate broker did he have any doctrine about preacher-mayors laid down for him" (21). For Lewis, Americans were not just sacrificing their critical capacities while in church, but were abandoning them entirely. Rare birds like Will's agnostic wife might see through the ideology of the status quo and realize that some Christian ministers accepted evolution, but men like Kennicott and Babbitt had allowed everything in life—even prayer—to be reduced to a rung in the upward climb of capitalism. Among the results, as Babbitt dimly senses, is "mechanical religion—a dry, hard church, shut off from the real life of the streets, inhumanly respectable as a top hat" (241).

The depth of Lewis's frustration with this perversion of Christianity is evident in the regularity with which he uses religious metaphors

for other aspects of life. In fact, it is difficult to imagine his novels were he not allowed to portray new technologies and architecture as the products of religious devotion. In Kennicott's mind, for instance, "motoring was a faith not to be questioned, a high-church cult, with electric sparks for candles, and piston-rings possessing the sanctity of altar-vessels" (214); Babbitt is also a "pious motorist" (3) who passes to his son the tradition of "the Great God Motor" (19).¹¹ Lewis seems to have found humanity's increasing mobility a particularly compelling analogy for transcendence: in *Gopher Prairie*, the railroad is also "a new god . . . a deity created by man that he might keep himself respectful to Property" (*Main Street* 254). And the author's description of Babbitt's office tower might well have been borrowed by McPherson for her ode to Angelus Temple: it "aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods" (*Babbitt* 1). Babbitt's and McPherson's buildings were both "temple-spire[s] of the religion of business, a faith passionate, exalted, surpassing common men" (13).

Keeping in mind such 1920s obfuscation of the boundaries between religion, technology, and capitalism, *Elmer Gantry* constitutes more than a simple attack on fundamentalism. There is room for expansion here because no matter how readers—pious and irreverent alike—have evaluated the novel's depiction of religion, they have assumed that verisimilitude was Lewis's main goal. Sunday understood *Elmer Gantry* as a viciously inaccurate portrait of his species and thus wrote newspaper reviews inviting God to "land a haymaker right on [Lewis's] old button" (qtd. in Lingeman 302).¹² Other fundamentalists banned the novel in Boston and Kansas City and invited Lewis to attend his own hanging. Even among more liberal interpreters, though, there has been an enduring assumption that the novel aims to function primarily as realism. Biographer Mark Schorer has had a disproportionately influential voice in dismissing the work as an "extraordinarily full account of every form of religious decay [in which] nothing is missing except all religion and all humanity" (119). A similar expectation of mimetic accuracy dominated reviews immediately after the novel's release, when Charles W. Ferguson complained that Elmer "lacks verisimilitude" (48) and *New York Times* reviewer Elver Davis concluded, "when you have finished 'Elmer Gantry' you are inclined to feel that nothing could be much worse than Christianity as it is currently preached and practiced" (BR1).

The problem with these judgments is that they ignore both the distinction between realism and satire and the possibility that the two narrative postures might coexist. Participating in the recent revival of Lewis criticism, Paula Marantz Cohen challenges Schorer's dismissal that the novelist simply entrenched cultural stereotypes by creating his "Babbitts" and "Gantrys." Instead of reading Lewis as an overreacting

simplifier, she argues that it is precisely his indelible marks on the early twentieth century's socioeconomic and religious consciences that make Lewis worthy of study. Furthermore, she discerns that earlier Lewis critics have suffered from an inability "to reconcile the satirist with the bourgeois apologist. They could not conceive that an author might be both at once" (Cohen 8). In the same vein, I would suggest that *Elmer Gantry* is a latter-day exemplar of Philip Fisher's argument in *Hard Facts* that our most significant cultural work has often been achieved by popular forms rendered taboo because of their dependence

<p style="text-align: center;">THE MARRIAGE BED</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>By Ernest Pascal</i></p> <p style="font-size: small;">"Real facts of life laid bare for inspection with a growing completeness that is characteristically classic in its design." —Boston Post. 5th printing, \$2.00</p>	<h1 style="margin: 0;">Elmer Gantry</h1> <p style="margin: 5px 0;">has swept the country. All America is reading this gargantuan novel</p> <p style="font-size: 2em; margin: 0;">—AND</p> <p style="font-size: 1.5em; margin: 0;">EVERYONE IS ASKING—</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is the man Elmer Gantry possible? 2. Is Lewis's attack on "organized" religion, on "go-getter" and revivalist methods in the churches, justified? 3. Are the portraits of Sharon Falconer, deacons' daughters, ministers' wives, choir singers, grossly exaggerated? 4. Is it possible that leaders of churches can be as ignorant and as uncultured as the churchmen in this book? 5. Has Lewis over-estimated the number of doubting preachers? <p style="margin: 10px 0;"><i>"When you have finished 'Elmer Gantry' you are inclined to feel that nothing could be much worse than Christianity as it is currently preached and practiced."</i></p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;"><i>— Elmer Davis, N. Y. Times</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">THE WORLD IN THE MAKING</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>By Count Hermann Keyserling</i></p> <p style="font-size: small;">A new book by the author of "The Travel Diary of a Philosopher." Translated by Mamie Samet. \$2.00</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">THE BAND PLAYS DIXIE</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>By Morris Markes</i></p> <p style="font-size: small;">A Civil War romance, "startling in the originality of its plot." —N. Y. Times. 2nd printing. \$2.00</p>	<p style="margin: 0;">ELMER GANTRY—By SINCLAIR LEWIS</p> <p style="margin: 0;">Everywhere, \$2.50. <small>Author of "Main Street," "Hobbit," "Arrowsmith"</small></p> <p style="margin: 10px 0;">HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY 383 Madison Avenue New York</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">EAST SIDE WEST SIDE</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>By Felix Rosenbergl</i></p> <p style="font-size: small;">"An enthralling epic of New York life." —The New Yorker. 6th printing. \$2.00</p>

Fig. 3. Printed a month after *Elmer Gantry's* publication, this nearly full-page ad in the *New York Times* reflects the assumption that the novel's primary purpose was historical accuracy (*New York Times*, 1927 BR19).

on exaggeration. After such narratives have been in circulation long enough, Fisher explains, the objectionable character becomes a "political target of every later mind privileged to look out through the structure that would never have existed without those very elements that now seem so offensive" (7). As Fisher says of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom*, I think Elmer Gantry struck such a cogent figure that he "came rapidly to seem an entrenched burden that served as a barrier to the intelligent perceptions that [he himself] had initially made possible" (21). This approach does not make Elmer more or less a caricature, nor does it deny Lewis's attack on fundamentalism, but it suggests that there is more here than earlier, more visceral reactions have allowed us to see.

Religious Damnation and Scientific Sainthood

Elmer Gantry tracks its protagonist from his Baptist college football days as the irreverent "Hell-cat" to his ultimate triumph as the duplicitous minister of a large urban Methodist church. After his undergraduate conversion under the peer pressure of a small-town revival, Elmer discovers that testifying about the Lord affords considerable financial security and social esteem. Subsequent chapters follow him from seminary through his first rural parish to a sudden expulsion by the Baptists after he is caught consuming beer instead of serving communion. Eventually, we reach Elmer's partnership with revivalist Sharon Falconer, which dominates the large middle section of the novel excerpted for the 1960 film adaptation. A woman with tremendous charisma and an even greater messiah complex, Sharon teaches Elmer to exploit religious communities across the country before imitating McPherson and building her own permanent tabernacle. Here Lewis's fantasy comes through violently: on opening night the structure burns to the ground, taking its delusional priestess with it. Elmer rebounds with a brief career hawking New Thought philosophy before finally making it good with the Methodists. Rising rapidly from a small town pastorate to a metropolitan church, our hero becomes a fearless invader of saloons and houses of ill repute, a man whose very family becomes a tool for maintaining his façade of sanctity.

At its most basic level, of course, the plot is a frontal assault on fundamentalism's self-righteousness, coerciveness, and hypocrisy. Inviting Schorer's assessment that *Elmer Gantry* ignores real religion and human dignity, Lewis's narrator reflects that Elmer "got everything from the church and Sunday School, except, perhaps, any longing whatever for decency and kindness and reason" (34). Fundamentalism emerges as a system of joyless denial that portrays Jesus as "a monster that hates youth and laughter" (125).

Moreover, as in previous Lewis novels, such religion's tenets must be held without question—at least publicly. The athletic evangelist who converts Elmer also threatens to "knock the block off" anyone with "contemptible, quibbling, atheistic, smart-aleck doubts" (43), even as Lewis shows us that the man struggles with his own questions. The same is true of a pastor's wife who has played her role obediently for decades, but in the privacy of the bedroom demands to know why "it's only in religion that the things you got to believe are agin all experience" (75). Ultimately, Elmer decides to defy such weakness. In his first Methodist pulpit, "his great voice swell[ed] to triumphant certainty as he talked" (264), and when he is examined for ordination by the denominational conference, they remark about how pleasurable it is "to examine a candidate who could answer the questions with such ringing certainty" (291). Sharon is similarly absurd in her self-assurance, even claiming to be "above sin" and that she may do whatever she wishes sexually "and it would only symbolize my complete union with Jesus!" (173).

Behind Elmer and Sharon lies a backdrop of minor characters who both echo and challenge this megalomania. On one hand, the pious Eddie Fislinger is expert at proof-texting, the "sport of looking up Biblical texts to prove a preconceived opinion" (92). Lewis mocks this opportunistic hermeneutic repeatedly, noting that "before the Civil War the Northern Baptists proved by the Bible, unanswerably, that slavery was wrong; and the Southern Baptists proved by the Bible, irrefutably, that slavery was the will of God" (85). The president of Elmer's college is similarly captivated by absolute knowledge, insisting that whatever else may define a good preacher, "he must found his work on good hard scientific *facts*—the proven facts of the Bible" (69). On the other hand, Lewis provides supporting actors, like Elmer's fellow seminarian Frank Shallard, who criticize religion's assimilation by Enlightenment objectivism. Frank appreciates the necessity of doubt, questions whether the lavish eroticism of the Song of Songs can really be reduced to a prophesy of the love between Christ and the church, and complains that Christian worship is irremediably boring. Called out finally by the traitorous Elmer, he gives up his pastoral career in order to confess that "he was not sure of a future life; that he wasn't even certain of a personal God" (367).

Apparently of equal significance among the minor characters, in Lewis's mind, was Methodist pastor Andrew Pengilly. After *Elmer Gantry's* publication, Lewis learned that Kansas City, where he had done his most extended research, would be the site of the 1928 General Conference of the Methodist Church. Writing his publisher to encourage an extra advertising effort, he took his habitual step of providing copy: "You have heard that Gantry is a scoundrel, but do

you know that in Frank Shallard and Mr. Pengilly, one a liberal and one a fundamentalist, Mr. Lewis has produced two of the noblest and most inspiring of preachers in fiction?" (*From Main Street* 265). The character he pushes forward beside Frank is imagined as "white clear through. He was a type of clergyman favored in pious fiction, yet he actually did exist" (*Elmer Gantry* 235). It might seem, then, that we finally have two characters who defy Elmer's objectivism, but Lewis's recommendation of Shallard and Pengilly actually reveals that even if the author could envision a humble spirituality, he still could not create a rational one. Those pastors lured to purchase *Elmer Gantry* by the forty-nine billboards plastering Kansas City found that instead of modeling religious self-examination, the mystical Pengilly "never [after converting] doubted the peace of God" (235). His advice to a struggling Frank Shallard consists entirely of urging the younger man to abandon his questions and realize that it is "with our hearts, our faith, that we have to accept Jesus Christ, and not with our historical charts" (237). Ultimately, the pretended certainty Pengilly offers Frank is no different from Sharon's deadly indifference toward fire. As her new tabernacle is engulfed in flames, she evinces a "faith" that defies reason rather than supporting or reaching beyond it: "We're in the temple of the Lord! He won't harm you! I believe! Have faith! I'll lead you safely through the flames!" (220).

One might decide at this point that if Lewis was one-sided, at least he gave fundamentalism a much-needed drubbing. This assessment, where existing criticism usually leaves us, is true enough as far as it goes, but it understands *Elmer Gantry* as merely capitalizing on the fundamentalist-modernist binary already prevalent in the mid-twenties. While Lewis clearly wanted to confront fundamentalism, a broader examination of his works shows how intertwined religion and science were becoming. *Arrowsmith* in particular provides valuable context for *Elmer Gantry* because it addresses religion with a very different tone; whereas Lewis's preacher novel has been received as a complete denunciation of religion, his scientist novel is generally viewed as a hymn of praise to the Enlightenment. Written against reservations that Lewis could see society's failings but never its potential, the tale follows Martin Arrowsmith from his days as a student lab assistant to those as a medical doctor, a public health official, and a research scientist. The novel's relatively happy ending was, for Lewis, a unique reconciliation of heroism and polemic. In short, after a plague outbreak forces the main character to prioritize saving lives over irrefutably establishing his antidote's effectiveness, he retreats to a rustic laboratory to do hard science uncomplicated by commercial or humanistic interests.

For my purposes, *Arrowsmith's* most critical difference from *Elmer Gantry* is that Elmer and Sharon eschew doubt like their fundamentalist inspirations, but Martin follows his mentor Max Gottlieb (modeled after mechanistic scientists like Jacques Loeb) in honoring skepticism. To this extent *Arrowsmith* seems to grasp the uncertainty of faith that *Elmer Gantry* ignores, with Martin learning "the ultimate lesson of science, which is to wait and doubt" (11) and becoming "curiously humble" on realizing "how remarkably much he did not know" (39). However, Martin's modest, careful methodology stiffens into its own unbending ideology. He can meticulously pick apart the false assumptions of earlier scientists, but he is unable to land on his own theory because he makes doubt into an end rather than a means. As we saw in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, Lewis emphasizes this inelasticity by describing the secular in terms of the religious: "[Martin] preached to himself, as Max Gottlieb had once preached to him, the loyalty of dissent, the faith of being very doubtful, the gospel of not bawling gospels, the wisdom of admitting the probable ignorance of one's self and of everybody else, and the energetic acceleration of a Movement for going very slow" (227). What *Arrowsmith* receives from Gottlieb, in other words, is "the religion of a scientist" that is "so religious that he will not accept quarter-truths, because they are an insult to his faith. He wants that everything should be subject to inexorable laws" (278).

Recognizing the power of this objectivism brings *Arrowsmith* much closer to *Elmer Gantry*—and twenties modernism to fundamentalism—than they are often understood. If Elmer subjugates himself to the Baptists, Sharon Falconer, New Thought, and the Methodists before becoming the puppeteer of his own congregations, Martin disciplines himself to a series of equally domineering masters, from medical doctors to public health experts to research scientists. As in *Elmer Gantry* and the rhetoric of both fundamentalists and modernists, "faith" in *Arrowsmith* indicates a naïve speculation about the unknown. When Martin proposes a public health initiative without sufficient forethought, for instance, he is said to have "no suggestions but only a beautiful faith" (170), and when he demands greater rigor than his boss in assessing food production sites, he "lacked Pickerbaugh's buoyant faith in the lay inspectors" (256). As he grows less credulous, his doubts shift almost imperceptibly from method to metaphysic; he decides "there is no Truth but only many truths; that Truth is not a colored bird to be chased among the rocks and captured by its tail, but a skeptical attitude toward life" (271). This hermeneutic of suspicion only becomes more addictive when he reaches the McGurk Institute, but we still see that Martin abandons it when empiricism is involved. Searching for the key principle of his phage, "he wanted

to know—to know" (322), and "he desired a perfection of technique in the quest for absolute and provable fact" (406). Read against Elmer's testimonies about certain religious knowledge, the only real distinction is that Martin's obsession with certain scientific knowledge seems more sincere. The irony is that while both characters become obsessed with unquestionable, perfect knowledge, Martin becomes a messiah and Elmer an anti-Christ.

Furthermore, as D. J. Dooley noted four decades ago, Lewis compares Martin's research to religious devotion even more persistently than he did the cars and trains in *Main Street* or the gadgets and buildings in *Babbitt*.¹³ As a young disciple, Martin insists that Gottlieb's mere presence in a lab is "a prayer" (29), and he eventually receives his mentor's "episcopal blessings" (52). After becoming a doctor, he reads advertisements for surgical equipment that subjugate religious sacrifice to scientific triumphalism: "*You may drive through blizzard and august heat, and go down into the purple-shadowed vale of sorrow and wrestle with the ebon-cloaked Powers of Darkness for the lives of your patients, but that heroism is incomplete without Modern Progress*" (152). Each of his successive masters is a "god" (184) seeking new apostles to spread an evermore technological gospel; Pickerbaugh, for instance, observes that disease control needs "a really inspired, courageous, overtowering leader—say a Billy Sunday of the movement" (194), and so he quite fittingly rents one of Sunday's abandoned tabernacles for a public health expo. Martin himself becomes a type of Christ figure as he is subjected to temptations of wealth, power, and fame. Hearing of his employee's potentially groundbreaking discovery, Dr. Tubbs "led him to a mountain top and showed him all the kingdoms of the world" (321). The pressure does not relent when Martin's antidote finally provides relief from the plague: the survivors publish a newspaper article naming him "the savior of all our lives" (396).

If it is not surprising enough that *Arrowsmith* effectively celebrates the same objectivism repudiated in *Elmer Gantry* or that its scientists rely on religious rhetoric just as much as the fundamentalists, there are also extensive biographical affinities between Lewis and both Martin and Elmer. Take the impulse that Martin finally follows to abandon traditional society, including his wife and child, for an all-male, self-sufficient world of abstract research. His flight to Terry Wickett's cabin at "Birdies' Rest" is a return to a purportedly prelapsarian world "in order to be pure" (444) or, as Terry calls it, "a mis'able return to monasteries" (447). It is little different from the idealization of a simplified past at work in *Elmer Gantry*, where Frank's favorite professor hopes to retire to an Edenic farm with "a big vineyard and seven books" (125), and where Sharon recreates

a Southern plantation right "out of a story-book" (179), complete with aged and bowing black servants. It is also reminiscent of Lewis's never-ending search for a mythic wilderness, a wanderlust that kept him from living hardly more than a year of his adult life in a single location.¹⁴ While drafting *Elmer Gantry*, for example, he retreated with friends—but not wife or child—to Big Pelican Lake in Minnesota where he rented a rustic cottage and set up shop in a tent. Championing 1920s skepticism, he was concurrently facing his past: like Elmer, Lewis was converted to Christianity in his late adolescence, and the YMCA revival's energy even led him to commit on the spot to life as a missionary. Elmer's and Frank's first pastoral experience, in which they pump a railroad handcar eleven miles to their assigned village, is also nearly autobiographical, since a seventeen-year-old Lewis had made his own ten-mile railroad treks to teach a rural Sunday school.¹⁵

The handcar is, in fact, a fitting metaphor for the development of Lewis's personal convictions in that it requires two people to repeatedly press a lever in opposite directions. If Lewis the adolescent had declared himself ready to convert the heathen for Christ, a year later the author observed that "the Christian religion is a crutch" (Lingeman 22). This is the position he maintained while writing *Arrowsmith*, telling his wife in a letter decrying sanatoriums, "however irrational I may be at times, I worship rationality more than I do faith" (Hegger Lewis 213). But the religious charlatan on the other side of the handcar is equally autobiographical, especially in his mimetic abilities and binary thinking. Indeed Elmer's capacity for memorization and imitation may be second only to that of Lewis and Sunday. Replicating one of Sunday's most embarrassing gaffes, the fictional revivalist copies sermon fluff directly from the speeches of Robert Ingersoll, one of Protestantism's most outspoken nineteenth-century opponents. As Lewis personally observed, Sunday made headlines by "imitat[ing] nearly everybody and everything in the whole gamut of stage acting, even in diving off the stage and coming up blowing water out of his lungs in imitation of a man diving after a pearl" and "act[ing] out with sound effects a locomotive race which took ten full minutes to portray" (McLoughlin 27). Lewis employed similar impressions as a means of masking his social anxiety, and critics have long marveled at his reproduction of contemporary slang. Even his pre-draft research for a novel regularly included personalized method acting in which he sought out experiences parallel to those of his character. For *Arrowsmith*, Lewis attended Catholic masses during a trip to the Caribbean; for *Elmer Gantry*, he obeyed Sunday's altar call on Broadway as if he were a convert, drove to Los Angeles to hear McPherson, and honed his oratory from several Kansas City pulpits.

While verisimilitude was not Lewis's ultimate purpose, his novels gained their initial appeal via the same sensitivity to real experience demonstrated by Elmer and Sunday.

If Lewis's personal life was a constantly alternating system of pressure and release, his narrative structures rely even more on the handcar's progression through opposition. This applies from the level of the sentence to Lewis's organization of whole chapters and sections. We have already come across several of Lewis's signature sentences and their contradictory self-reversing logic: Will Kenicott's shock at his wife's lack of faith, without being "quite sure what was the nature of the faith she lacked"; the juxtaposition of the Northern Baptists proving "unanswerably" that slavery is wrong and their Southern brethren proving "irrefutably" that it is fine; and Martin Arrowsmith's vigilance in reminding himself of "the energetic acceleration of a Movement for going very slow." My suggestion is that these clashing structures are Lewis's closest approach, during the twenties, to the possibility of a faith that embraced doubt. He could not quite imagine such a radical faith *in itself*, but he carved out space for it by critiquing both sides of contradictory discourses. Like the epigraph that opens *Main Street*, in which Lewis speaks of small-town America as our paradoxically "sure faith" (15), the author's admonition in *Arrowsmith* that "like all ardent agnostics, Martin was a religious man" (170) anticipates the internal dynamic of *Elmer Gantry*.¹⁶ Relying on this contrary approach more than ever before, Lewis covers the novel with these reversals: with Sharon, Elmer "could for once love so much that he did not insist on loving" (*Elmer Gantry* 178); in one of his temporary efforts to repent, "he prayed for deliverance from prayer" (179); his New Thought mentor, aptly named "Mrs. Riddle," teaches people "to understand Sanskrit philosophy without understanding either Sanskrit or philosophy" (222); and under her instruction, Elmer "did very well at Prosperity, except that he couldn't make a living out of it" (225).

That Lewis's fictions gather their momentum through purposeful self-contradiction is even more apparent in larger portions of narrative. In the first pages of *Elmer Gantry*, before "Hell-cat" is converted, a whole paragraph narrating the devout Eddie Fislinger's conversation with Elmer's concerned mother epitomizes Lewis's habit of paying out a line, then reeling it back: "Undoubtedly, Eddie explained, when Elmer had been baptized, at sixteen, he had felt conviction, he had felt the invitation, and the burden of his sins had been lifted. But he had not, Eddie doubted, entirely experienced salvation. He was not really in a state of grace. He might almost be called unconverted" (35). Scorning the ease with which early-century fundamentalists assessed others' salvation, the paragraph ends up directly contradicting

its opening sentence. In an essay, this would be poor writing, but here it artfully conveys Eddie's attempt to assuage his personal sense of insufficiency by focusing on Elmer's impiety. The same strategy works for Lewis between paragraphs. Describing the setting when Elmer visits the home of a prominent pastor, for example, Lewis offers a six-sentence paragraph detailing a somber, timeworn palace complete with a crucifixion inspired by El Greco and a refectory table "of ancient oak, set round with grudging monkish chairs" (244). Immediately, the next paragraph interjects, "The picture must be held in mind, because it is so beautifully opposite to the residence of the Reverend Dr. Wesley R. Toomis, bishop of the Methodist area of Zenith" (244–45). Lewis shamelessly tricks us and then in a third paragraph describes the actual abode, "a chubby modern house, mostly in tapestry brick with varicolored imitation tiles" (245).

Recognizing this habit of intentional contradiction on expanding scales also allows for a stronger grasp of Lewis's unique intermingling of realism and satire. We have already seen that *Elmer Gantry* has been read almost exclusively—by supporters and detractors alike—as if the author's goal were a historically accurate and broadly representative depiction of the Protestant minister. This approach assumes that satire is always entirely an attack and ignores the possibility that an implicit affirmation motivates the call for reform. Satire's outrageous humor can serve both deconstructive and reconstructive aims, and this may be what earlier reviewers missed about *Elmer Gantry*, perhaps because they wrote during periods when religion was commonly considered off-limits for ridicule. Several such essays note a distinction between the novel's opening historicity and its decreasing realism but then dismiss Elmer as he "degenerates into a bounder and a rogue" (Ferguson 48). An alternative view, though, is that the novel leads us away from verisimilitude and toward parody in order to criticize religious extremism and in the process open the way for a healthier, less polarizing, less certain faith. I think this is precisely what the novel suggests in a late, otherwise irrelevant conversation between bit players at a Zenith bar. Just before Elmer breaks in with his mob of prohibitionists, the saloon-keeper observes that Americans used to laugh at the revivalists, but "Now dey get solemn. When dey start laughing again, dey roar dere heads off at fellows like Gantry and most all dese preachers dat try to tell everybody how dey got to live. And if the people laugh—oof!—God help the preachers!" (*Elmer Gantry* 341).

This hint of metanarrative and its concentration on ironic laughter points back to many invitations in the novel to take Elmer as a temporarily likable but ultimately despicable buffoon, not a representative clergyman. One of the earliest hints comes after Elmer exposes

the closeted liberalism of Frank Shallard's favorite professor. Despite the fact that this results in the scholar's firing, it never occurs to our modern Judas "who sent him thirty dimes, wrapped in a tract about holiness, nor why. But he found the sentiments in the tract useful in a sermon, and the thirty dimes he spent for lively photographs of burlesque ladies" (126). Such fecklessness is not to be taken literally any more than the name of the traveling salesman Elmer meets soon thereafter, "Ad Locust" (144). The farce expands further after Elmer escapes an engagement by tempting his fiancée into kissing another man in front of her father. Although Elmer can hardly flee the girl's dowdy devotion quickly enough, he is indignant on learning that the embarrassed couple will be married by another minister: "They might have *ast* me, anyway," he grumbles (150). Alongside such situational comedy, Lewis provides direct stage whispers that interrupt any sense of realism the novel might have been building. Note, here, the narrator's parenthetical commentary: "Elmer spoke of Floyd as a future cousin and professed his fondness for him, his admiration of the young man's qualities and remarkable singing (Floyd Naylor sang about as Floyd Naylor would have sung.)" (138). The context provides no clue as to Naylor's singing talent; Lewis simply invites us to laugh at the character's absurd name and his authorial wink. Another aside occurs during one of Elmer's first conversations with Sharon Falconer. When Elmer enthuses, "I'm the crack salesman of the Pequot Farm Implement Company, Sharon, and if you don't believe it—" she interjects, "Oh, I do. (She shouldn't have.) I'm sure you tell the truth often" (165). It is not that Lewis the novelist thinks the reader needs further reason to question Elmer's integrity, but that Lewis the satirist wants to share his delight in the character's gullibility. Thus he constantly prioritizes entertainment over plausibility—as when Elmer seduces Sharon's guileless pianist, who is so encouraged by Elmer's flattery that she takes seriously the saccharine inquiry, "Do you *like* to have me like your music?" (214).

The challenge of reading *Elmer Gantry*, consequently, is to hold together its serious, historical assault on fundamentalist hypocrisy and its satirical stretches beyond verisimilitude. Readers' chuckles were critical to Lewis because they led away from extremism; at the same time, he stood quite seriously behind Frank's warning that "in its laughter at the 'monkey trial' at Dayton, [America] did not understand the veritable menace of the Fundamentalists' crusade" (376). The key, apparently, remains in laughing not with a derision borne of the objectivism one claims to eschew, but in the awareness that faith is about risk-taking and as such sometimes puts human beings in precarious, ironic positions. My sense is that *Elmer Gantry* brings readers right to the edge of this wisdom, but that after creating room

for a more radical, less dogmatic faith, it ultimately shies away. The best example of that flinch is accessible now that we have gained a sense of Lewis's pendular structures. Zooming out to a still wider angle on his narrative reversals, we can now grasp how even the novel's chapter organization reveals both satire's unique capacities and its limitations.

After long stretches of narrative focus on main characters, Lewis habitually breaks away to develop a minor figure that a protagonist will soon encounter. In *Elmer Gantry* such an interruption comes in chapter seventeen, where we pan away from Elmer to catch up with Frank's halting pastoral development. Although the next chapter immediately returns to Elmer, the groundwork is thereby laid for Frank's eventual role in distracting us from a fascinating narrative dead end. After chapter twenty-four reminds us of Frank via Elmer's repayment of a long-ignored debt, three chapters later Lewis makes the mistake of exposing his novel's very skeleton. During Elmer's vacation from his home church to earn cash on the Chautauqua speaking circuit, his host one night is the same Reverend Pengilly that we earlier saw Lewis advertise as an appealing corrective to Elmer's knavery. To hear Lewis the promoter talk, Pengilly's "faith" had no place for doubt or ambiguity, but with a single sentence in the novel, the narrator privileges Pengilly as the one character to glimpse the roots of Elmer's self-deception. The encounter lasts only three paragraphs, in which Elmer brags of his church's burgeoning attendance and donation totals, and then Pengilly lowers the boom: "Mr. Gantry, why don't you believe in God?" (353). The perspicacity of the question was likely as stunning for the author as it is for the reader, and thus the chapter had to end immediately. Turning the page, the narrative shifts immediately to Frank and stays with him for two chapters. Only then can Lewis safely return to Elmer, and only by making no further reference to the Pengilly conversation. That encounter nearly gives up the novel's whole premise, revealing that Elmer knows hardly anything about the daily wrestling of an uncertain faith, but merely adopts the posturing religious knowledge that Lewis repudiates. By the time the charlatan is faced with the one honest, direct challenge to his fundamentalism, he is far too much a caricature of a religious believer for Lewis to draw out the moment.

What *Elmer Gantry* does, then, is not so much imagine a faith free from claims of certain knowledge as create space for that possibility. Lewis fleshed out that vision much further in later works like *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), *Kingsblood Royal* (1947), and *The God-Seeker* (1949), but his most popular and critically-acclaimed 1920s novels were products of a period in which it was commonly assumed that religion and science were necessarily opposites, even

when evidence existed to the contrary. I suspect related arguments might be made regarding other novels of that decade, like Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920), which betrays a growing weariness with the strictures of certainty, or Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), with its warning against complete self-determination and particularly its frame narrative's commentary on fundamentalism. Addressing such interpenetrations of religion and science in the twenties may also offer insights into how later twentieth-century American literature and culture engage this nexus. Historians like George Marsden have invested considerable energy in drawing parallels and distinctions between twenties fundamentalism and the Religious Right that emerged in the late seventies; the time is ripe for scholars of literary and cultural studies to build on and further complicate such observations.¹⁷ Whatever emotions these phenomena generate, it can only help to have more careful analyses of religion's reach beyond traditional institutions into the fabric of daily life, including scientific and technological areas like digital media, stem-cell research, and artificial intelligence. Beyond offering deeper understandings of American fiction, such investigations may encourage both sides in the ongoing science-religion debates to eschew the pretense of certainty and adopt postures of open, unapologetic risk.

Notes

1. See, for example, Jacques Derrida's essay, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone"; Jürgen Habermas's similarly-titled "Faith and Knowledge"; Robert Markley's "Objectivity as Ideology: Boyle, Newton, and the Languages of Science"; and Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*.
2. For more on US religion's initial reception of evolutionary theory, see Mark A. Noll and David Livingstone's "Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield on Science, the Bible, Evolution, and Darwinism" and Michael Lienesch's *In the Beginning: Fundamentalism, the Scopes Trial, and the Making of the Antievolution Movement*.
3. Bryan's objectivism is an American outgrowth of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, which dates to the mid 1700s. As George Marsden explains in *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, this system's basic assumptions are that "we can know the real world directly" (14) and that "one can intuitively know the first principles of morality as certainly as one can apprehend other essential aspects of reality" (15).

4. Indeed this verse continues to be de-contextualized and misrepresented, as if it recommended faith in a void, absent of history, with blindfold firmly tightened. By contrast, the treatments of this term by such diverse philosopher-theologians as Søren Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, and Jacques Derrida share a more nuanced sense of faith's inherent risk and uncertainty.
5. I am not alone in finding Mencken's diatribe superficial. In the *New York Times* review of *Elmer Gantry*, in fact, Elver Davis anticipated the so-called New Atheism of recent years in decrying a fast-growing militant secularism, which he named after Mencken's magazine, *American Mercury*:

No doubt Mr. Mencken, like other prophets, set out to teach men the truth with the idea that the truth would make them free; and like other prophets he sees them line up in a joyful *goosestep*, proclaiming that his truth is the sole truth, in which alone lies salvation. This, after all, is the most extraordinary of recent religious phenomena—the welding together of assorted disgruntlements into a new church, as thoroughly regimented as any Christian body and quite as intolerant. The intolerance has to be taken out in talk at present, other religions controlling the secular arm: but if Mercurianity keeps on going it is likely to be the State church of America within a couple of decades. (BR1)

6. Another key model was New York City pastor John Roach Straton. In 1923, annoyed with Straton's strident proclamations about biblical inerrancy and Darwinian heresy, Charles Francis Potter challenged his fellow minister to a public showdown. Broadcast on radio and packing Carnegie Hall, the widely advertised fundamentalist-modernist debates foreshadowed the Scopes Trial's role in the 1920s US transition from international military conflict into an ideological civil war. The opponents claimed vastly different motives: Potter thought that evolutionists and creationists alike were undereducated about each other's positions, engendering "much unscientific dogmatism on both sides" (Straton vii), while Straton saw a chance to demonstrate once and for all that evolutionism was a dangerous lie. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the ensuing clashes (two of which were "won" by each side), Potter exhibited greater intellectual modesty. What is more intriguing, though, is that neither combatant questioned the possibility of clear resolution on purely rational grounds. Straton warned, and Potter seemed to agree, that any alternative characterized by uncertainty or ambiguity was to be avoided: "Unless the Bible account of the creation of man is true . . . we *know* absolutely nothing about the way in which [humanity] appeared upon this planet" (50).
7. These statistics and others may be found in William McLoughlin's *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name*, perhaps the best place to start for research on the evangelist. For work on McPherson, see Matthew Avery Sutton's recent biography, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*.

8. The same mechanical logic was central to Bruce Barton's bestselling biography of Jesus, *The Man Nobody Knows*, which enjoyed twenty-seven printings between 1925 and 1927 because it demonstrated that "every one of the 'principles of modern salesmanship' on which business men so much pride themselves, are brilliantly exemplified in Jesus' talk and work" (50). This "health and wealth gospel" or "prosperity gospel" endured throughout the twentieth century, as evidenced by Bruce H. Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez* (2000), which has sold over nine million copies in at least seventeen languages.
9. In his history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century US religion, *Selling God*, Laurence R. Moore explains that "antebellum revivals and revival camp meetings were arguably the first, large-scale popular entertainments in the United States" (44–45). As such, they were sites for the gradual perfecting of American stage management. One of Sunday's most important nineteenth-century predecessors, Charles Grandison Finney, for instance, "counseled revivalists to adopt a style that we might call 'practiced spontaneity.' Stage-acting was the model" (50).
10. The self-satisfied moralism to which Lewis objects here (via his narrator) is extremely close to what Barton would also attack. His novel begins with a young boy objecting to portrayals of Jesus as a man who "went around for three years telling people not to do things" (Barton 4).
11. Even where it is not treated directly with religious metaphors, the technological fetish in *Babbitt* is consistently worshipful: "He admired the ingenuity of the automatic dial, clicking off gallon by gallon; admired the smartness of the sign: 'A fill in time saves getting stuck—gas to-day 31 cents'; admired the rhythmic gurgle of the gasoline as it flowed into the tank, and the mechanical regularity with which Moon turned the handle" (29).
12. Sunday's attitude toward *Elmer Gantry* was typical of his approach to "secular" literature. As he had admitted more than a decade earlier, "I wish I could sentence to death fifty popular writers who have been turning the people away from Jesus Christ" (McLoughlin 142).
13. Quoting several examples, Dooley observed, "the comparison of the scientist to the religious occurs many times. Science is the new religion to supplant outmoded creeds, and Gottlieb is its prophet" (108). In responding to an earlier draft of this essay, Lewis scholar James M. Hutchisson noted that *Dodsworth* (1929) also blurs science and religion in its main character's exposure to emerging technology and architecture, and that beyond Straton and Sunday, another model for Gantry was William Stidger, an evangelist fond of gadgets like lighted, revolving crosses.
14. Lewis's nostalgia for an American Eden also draws him much closer to Billy Sunday than the later would have enjoyed in "This Golden Half-Century, 1885–1935," written for *Good Housekeeping* and published originally in 1935. In this ode to the past, emphasizing the ideas of Lenin and Freud over technological advances and ignoring

minor skirmishes like the Spanish-American War and World War I, he begins: "Once upon a time there was an unbroken age of half a century, when there was romance everywhere, and life, instead of being a dusty routine, was exciting with hope and courage and adventure into utterly new lands" (*From Main Street* 254).

15. This detail, like several others here, is gleaned from Richard Lingeman's valuable biography, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*.
16. To my knowledge, D. J. Dooley is the only other critic who comments on Lewis's sentence style, but he evaluates its significance quite differently. Taking as his example the sentence, "Like all ardent agnostics, Martin was a religious man," Dooley claims, "it is obvious that there is not very much deep reflection behind the remark; it is merely a glib paradox designed to give an appearance of profundity" (117). While I agree that Lewis occasionally seems to be writing toward a word count, I think there is more going on here: the author is carving out a space for synthesis or mediation by turning both extremes on their heads. In this case he points out how easily objections to (substantive) religion can become a (functional) religion in themselves; the implicit question is whether faith can exist without dogmatism and doubt without atheism.
17. I am referring especially to material in the new edition of Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. Those interested in connections between American religious and literary history may also find helpful resources at the Religion and American History blog edited by Paul Harvey and Kelly Baker.

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