

Catholicism and American Borders in the Gothic Literary Imagination**Farrell O'Gorman****Publication Date**

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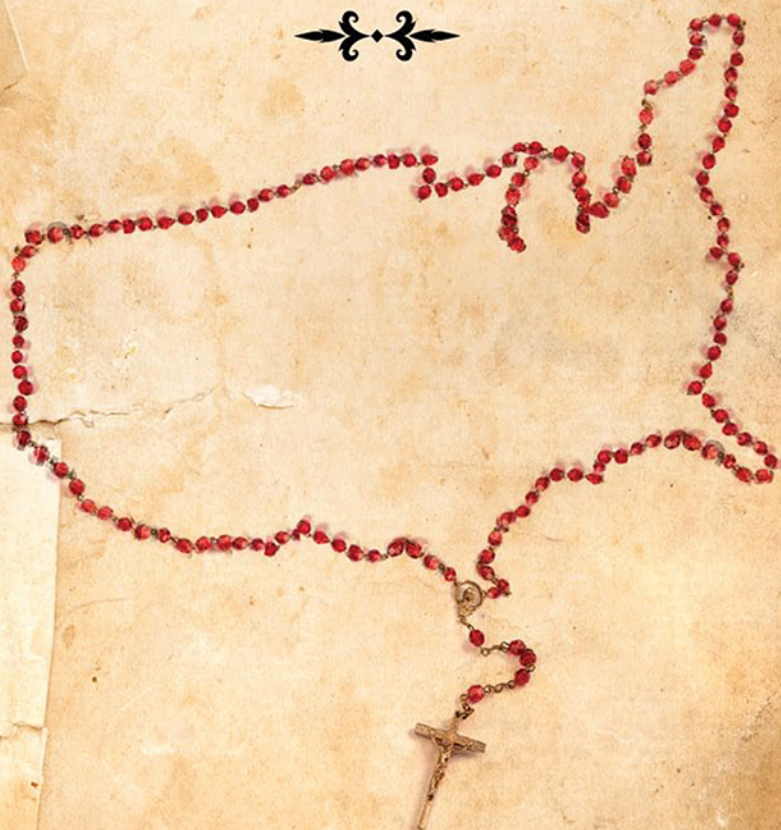
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CATHOLICISM *and*
AMERICAN BORDERS
in the
GOTHIC LITERARY
IMAGINATION



FARRELL O'GORMAN

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FARRELL O'GORMAN

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For Anna Clare and Jack

*Lucky to live in America
Called to communion beyond it*

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	<i>ix</i>
Introduction	<i>1</i>
CHAPTER 1 Crèvecoeur's Mask of the Modern: Roman Ruins and America's "New Man"	<i>39</i>
CHAPTER 2 Melville's "Monkish Fables": Catholic Bodies Haunting the New World	<i>67</i>
CHAPTER 3 Fear, Desire, and Communion in Chopin's Old <i>La Louisiane</i>	<i>97</i>
CHAPTER 4 Waste Lands, Border Histories, Gothic Frontiers: Faulkner, McCarthy, Percy	<i>141</i>
CHAPTER 5 O'Connor's "True Country": Borders, Crossings, Pilgrims	<i>183</i>
Coda: Catholicism, American Borders, and the Gothic in Contemporary U.S. Fiction	<i>225</i>
Notes	<i>249</i>
Bibliography	<i>291</i>
Index	<i>313</i>

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INTRODUCTION

Gothic fiction, the fiction of fear, has long been identified as paradoxically central to the literary tradition of the United States. Early exhortative texts such as the Declaration of Independence and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* clearly articulated an optimistic national narrative of rational, self-interested individuals escaping past tyranny to progress confidently together into an expansive future. By contrast, the Gothic fictions of writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner, and Toni Morrison have depicted nightmarish threats to national ideals, inherent flaws in those ideals and their implementation, or both—thereby radically challenging “America’s self-mythologization as a nation of hope and harmony.” Such is the critical consensus.¹ What scholars have failed to recognize adequately is the recurrent role in such fiction of a Catholicism that consistently threatens to break down borders separating U.S. citizens—or some representative “American”—from the larger world beyond. This role has in part reflected enduring fears of the faith in Anglo-American culture. British Gothic fiction originated in the eighteenth century as what one scholar pointedly deemed *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition*, responding directly to its audience’s pronounced anxieties regarding Catholicism.² Such anxieties were in a sense imported to the United States—not only in the antebellum era, and not only in the nation’s literature. Up until at least the middle of the twentieth century, educated and uneducated citizens alike often openly deemed Catholicism a particularly insidious

threat to the United States and the radical new possibilities that it, uniquely, had made available to its citizens, if not to all humanity.³

Today, expressions of fear of an invasive and foreign Catholicism menacing a potentially utopian United States are at once less common and more complicated than in decades or centuries past. Yet they linger in ways that cut across the conventional political spectrum. One recent expression of such fear is particularly useful in understanding the extent to which it has shaped longstanding notions of national identity. Prominent political scientist Samuel Huntington, best known for *The Clash of Civilizations*, argued in his final book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* that the future success of the United States depends on preservation of the "Anglo-Protestant culture" established by the earliest settlers in Britain's North American colonies. From New England southward, these settlers—not Anglicans, predominantly, but instead dissenters of the sort Edmund Burke deemed the most Protestant of Protestants—carried with them distinctive "values." Foremost among these was "individualism," closely tied to "the work ethic."⁴ Huntington claims that without this preexisting cultural foundation of values provided by dissenting Protestantism, Enlightenment "ideas" would never have yielded the great fruit that they eventually did in the United States—and that they failed to yield in regions of the Americas colonized by Catholics, for example, "Quebec, Mexico, or Brazil."⁵ Later generations of "immigrants," qualitatively different from the original British "settlers" in Huntington's schema, helped the nation to prosper only because they assimilated to its already established Anglo-Protestant culture. Huntington's great fear is that recent patterns of immigration, coupled with an emphasis on multiculturalism in the U.S. education system, will end this pattern of assimilation forever. His primary concern is with massive immigration from historically Catholic Latin America, especially Mexico—which, he notes grimly, once owned a significant portion of current U.S. territory.

Huntington's position clearly depends on certain debatable premises regarding religion. It is not, however, based on any profession of Christian faith. Even as Huntington maintains that the Protestant Reformation was ultimately more foundational for the United States than was the Enlightenment, he never promotes any form of Christianity as an end in itself. Rather, he touts Anglo-Protestantism as the historically necessary means

to and enduring basis for maintaining that which he sees as truly valuable: an “American Creed” that he describes, approvingly, as “Protestantism without God”; and an “American civil religion” that he describes, again approvingly, as “Christianity without Christ.”⁶ The purpose of “Anglo-Protestantism” as defined by Huntington is ultimately to replace Moses with George Washington and Jesus Christ with Abraham Lincoln. This is a view that Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards would undoubtedly find problematic—as many of Huntington’s less theologically inclined contemporaries have, for a variety of reasons.⁷ Yet the argument is worth noting because it so bluntly exemplifies longstanding Anglo-American habits of seeing the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment as essentially continuous with one another and, furthermore, of seeing “Anglo-Protestantism” as properly culminating in a post-Christian individualism that paradoxically serves as the common thread binding the nation together. In both views, U.S. identity is defined in opposition to a Catholic Christianity best kept beyond national borders.

Huntington writes, by his own account, as both a “scholar” and a “patriot.”⁸ His goal is to make a clear and persuasive argument regarding what he sees as necessary to maintain his own nation’s political and economic success. The enduring fiction writers to have come out of that nation are, by comparison, much more complex. The greatest of them are those at once most deeply rooted in and most profoundly critical of their culture. Such literary artists are ultimately attuned not to questions about national wellbeing but to larger questions about the nature of reality and humanity’s place in it—even as each understands and articulates those questions in relation to his or her own cultural tradition and historical moment. To some extent, writers ranging from Homer and Sophocles to Anton Chekhov and Virginia Woolf can help readers to see beyond the limits of the simultaneously triumphalist and anxious narrative of U.S. civil religion proposed by Huntington. My concern here, however, is with canonical fiction writers of the United States who do so, writers who—though they should not be categorized as “merely” Gothic in any reductive or dismissive sense—participate in and ultimately revise a larger Anglo-American Gothic literary tradition in relation to Catholicism. The authors I consider are J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Herman Melville, Kate Chopin, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, Cormac McCarthy,

and selected contemporary writers including Toni Morrison. Representing a variety of historical periods from the early republic up until the present day, these authors have distinct experiences of borders within and around their nation and hemisphere, itself an ever-emergent “America.” They also have distinct experiences of Catholicism and distinct ways of imagining the faith, often shaped at least in part within the Church itself. Their fictions collectively demonstrate the complicated and profound role that Catholicism has played in Gothic narratives of U.S. identity. These are only indirectly narratives of the nation as such: they are most often narratives that feature some representative American, a willfully autonomous individual who appears as synecdoche or achievement of the nation.

As will become clear, the border that these authors are ultimately most interested in is the border between self and “other.” More precisely, they are interested in the border the individual intellect attempts to maintain between itself and a larger reality that it seeks isolation from or control over, a reality that includes but is not limited to other individuals. Crucially, each author considered here understands or intuits that border as definitively bound up with U.S. identity, its enforcement essential to maintaining the individualism that Huntington and others posit as foundational for the nation. While such individualism may in part be tied to the legacy of dissenting Protestantism, it is more profoundly a function of liberalism, that is, “the long tradition of political philosophy—stemming in part from the social contract theories of thinkers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau—that places the autonomous individual at the center of social and political concern” and has been undeniably essential to the U.S. experiment.⁹ Regardless of whether such commitment to the individual is viewed as “Protestant” or as “liberal,” it is the rigidity of the border perceived as necessary to maintain or achieve individual autonomy that is most at issue and most chillingly challenged, complicated, and undermined in the fiction I consider here.¹⁰ That fiction’s rootedness in a particularly Anglo-American Gothic tradition is, as we shall see, immediately evident in that it is primarily concerned with threats to the autonomy of the individual of Anglo-Protestant provenance; its particular national character is clear in that it depicts such individuals as tending to believe—like each author’s presumed primary audience—that the United States is the one nation in which individuals can in fact achieve and maintain autonomy.

Accordingly, American exceptionalism of a certain sort is a foundational concern in these fictions.¹¹ Their Gothic character is largely a function of the fear that the nation is *not* exceptional, that the nation and individuals within it are susceptible to older, foreign patterns of experience most intimately modeled by Catholicism. Hence, fears of Catholicism are often bound up with fears related to the breakdown of borders, fears of outwardly imposed violence, contagion, or corruption—a corruption both literal and figurative, both bodily and moral. Yet simultaneously, Catholicism is here at times associated with a haunting desire within the individual to cross the borders of the self, with a troubling *passion* that, in the root sense of the word, necessarily involves suffering. Violence in these fictions generally occurs in conjunction with such fear or such desire. Violence, that is, occurs in attempts to assert the border both around the individual and around the space or nation in which he believes he might maintain his autonomy; or it occurs in conjunction with the breakdown of that border. Ultimately, each fiction considered here imagines some possible or realized crossing of borders in relation to Catholicism, whether that crossing is imagined as unwelcome or not—as invasion and violation or as communion and fulfillment. While the latter is less common, it exists at least as possibility in the work of some of the more recent writers considered here. These writers most clearly demonstrate that the Gothic mode can co-exist with or become a kind of religious writing, a possibility in fact inherent in a number of my readings here.

My analysis contributes not only to discourse regarding Gothic fiction but also to a broader ongoing dialogue regarding religion, secularism, and American literature. It extends the work of Jenny Franchot and Susan M. Griffin, who have demonstrated the profound relationship between anti-Catholicism and nineteenth-century U.S. literature, rightly reading anti-Catholic rhetoric in this context “not merely as a means of attacking Rome, but as a flexible medium of cultural critique” often directed in part at concerns within the nation itself.¹² My work also complements that of Tracy Fessenden and Elizabeth Fenton, who have recently demonstrated how in U.S. culture up until at least 1900 liberalism is closely tied to a species of “secularism” that “often appears . . . not as the condition of being without religion but, rather, as the condition of being without Catholicism.”¹³ My study is unique, however, in its intensive and sustained focus on Gothic

fiction; in that it considers authors writing from the Revolutionary era up until the present day; and in that it focuses primarily—though not exclusively—on authors of Catholic background or conviction.¹⁴ These authors are variously attuned to the fact that their nation has been shaped by a recurrent narrative in which “Protestantism’s emancipation from Catholicism” is seen as providing “the blueprint” for “secularism’s emancipation from ‘religion’ itself,” and in which a definitively post-Protestant secularism has been subtly affirmed as essential to proper citizenship.¹⁵ Examining the work of these authors with consistent attention to biographical contexts and to recent scholarship on U.S. Catholic intellectual and social history, I deepen and complicate previous critical insights regarding Catholicism and U.S. literature prior to 1900 and, furthermore, establish a previously overlooked context for understanding twentieth-century and contemporary authors who depict, engage, or are directly shaped by Catholicism.¹⁶

Whereas earlier studies tend to emphasize Catholicism’s association with Europe in the U.S. literary imagination, mine—in its consistent concern with borders—documents how that imagination often responds to a Catholicism associated with Latin America, the Caribbean, and Quebec. On a deeper level, it demonstrates how the U.S. Gothic tradition I trace here confirms and ultimately transforms the longstanding image in Anglophone literature of Catholicism as at root “a religion without a country; indeed, a religion inimical to nationhood.” In the nineteenth century, Catholicism was generally viewed in both “England and America as foreign infiltration, as, variously, Irish, German, Italian, French influence”: because “Protestantism was understood as a defining aspect of ‘American’ and ‘British,’” Catholicism was seen as “doubly dangerous, implying as it did both the immigrant’s refusal to be converted from a prior nationality and membership in an anti-national organization.”¹⁷ Of the fiction writers considered here, one might expect that those who had no personal experience within the Catholic Church (Melville and Faulkner) would be most apt to deem it as presenting some “foreign” challenge to the United States. Yet this is not necessarily the case. All of these writers—whether insiders to the Church, outsiders to it, or sojourners near its doors—deploy images of a somewhat foreign Catholicism in narratives that ultimately challenge a competing faith.

That faith, as defined by Patrick Deneen, is a “democratic faith” that is deeply characteristic of the United States. It is largely a “belief” in human perfectibility, “in the possibility of mastery and dominion—whether of other humans, nature, or even ourselves,” and it is “closely aligned” to a dangerous “self-satisfaction.”¹⁸ Strikingly, it is indeed a “faith,” though not generally recognized as such: it “tends to reject tragedy” as well as “warnings against hubris, invocations of human nature and human teleology, and reminders of inescapable human shortcomings.”¹⁹ Like Catholicism, this faith sees itself as potentially global and in the United States “too easily inclines to the illusion of national mission undertaken in the name of democratic universalism and crusading self-righteousness”—manifested, for example, in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s proclamation that “with America’s destiny lies the destiny of the world.”²⁰ Paradoxically, democratic faith proves inimical to true democracy in the long run. It is therefore in need of “friendly critics,” preferably native ones. Committed Catholic authors such as Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy might seem most prone to narrate the shortcomings of such a faith because, as Deneen puts it, “strenuous” Christian belief necessarily “forces a harrowing recognition of the vast chasm that exists between humanity’s self-flattering ambitions and God’s intentions.” In fact, all the Gothic fictions considered here—whether penned by professing Christians or not—present a harrowing challenge to democratic faith, to modernity’s “comforting belief” in “human mastery, progress, and the possibility of overcoming alienation” via a liberalism that in fact abets it.²¹ As fictions, their challenge is in large part existential as opposed to broadly political or abstractly philosophical, manifesting a real concern with the predicament and ultimate fate of actual flesh-and-blood persons as opposed to nations or political systems. It is often precisely in such focus on concrete individual experience that these authors most powerfully critique “borders” as conceived of within the United States in relation to Catholicism.

Such is the broad foundation of my argument. Before elaborating further, I define the Gothic with particular focus on its relationship to borders and Catholicism. I do so first genealogically, demonstrating how early Gothic fictions present the rise of individualism and concordant development of the modern nation-state as functions of Protestantism and secularism, imaginatively intertwined in opposition to Catholicism. This

necessarily entails consideration of foundational Gothic fictions in Britain as well as the United States. In considering them, I in many ways follow critics of the past two decades in reading the Gothic not primarily “as a discourse on and of the familial subject of psychoanalysis” but instead as “descriptive” of “the subject as articulated by the sociopolitical discourse of the nation.”²² Insofar as the fictions I consider are profoundly concerned with the border between self and other, however, familial relation and other “psychoanalytical” concerns do prove vital to my approach—though I ultimately place those concerns in a broader philosophical and religious framework. Elaborating this genealogy and framework enables me to return to, clarify, and further my thesis before providing an overview of individual chapters. I then conclude by suggesting the relevance of my argument to possible reconsiderations of the place of “the church” in American culture and, relatedly, to considerations of how a Catholicism that challenges borders might appear—and perhaps appeal—to imaginations in the United States and beyond in the twenty-first century.

CATHOLICISM AND ANGLO-AMERICAN GOTHIC FICTION: BRITISH ORIGINS, ATLANTIC CROSSINGS

Understanding the Gothic novel’s origins in eighteenth-century Britain is essential to understanding its formative relationship to Catholicism, related narrative complexity, and longstanding concern with borders—national and otherwise. Defined concisely, Gothic fiction is the fiction of horror and terror, marked by violence, the irrational, and supernatural or seemingly supernatural phenomena; it initially featured medieval settings such as the monastery or castle, and later the haunted mansion, house, family, or landscape. Despite this foundational relationship to the medieval (Catholic) past, many late twentieth-century scholars displayed a “de-historicising bias” in their analyses of the Gothic. Such scholars favored supposedly universal psychoanalytical readings or readings exclusively attentive to questions of race and gender, generally maintaining “an embarrassed silence upon the matter of early Gothic fiction’s anti-Catholicism.”²³ This critical error often occurred even in analysis of the British Gothic, which quite clearly highlighted national anxieties regarding religion in seminal classics

such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). These fictions, all written by Protestant authors living in an ascendant imperial Britain, were all set in a horrifically imagined and decadently irrational Catholic Mediterranean world. Such geographical configurations were transplanted into an American Hemisphere divided, roughly, between an Anglo-dominated North and a multiracial Latin South—a hemisphere given shape not only by conflicts between the colonial powers of England, Spain, and France, but also by what may understandably be deemed “the most enduring and formative ideological conflict of modern European history,” that between Catholicism and Protestantism.²⁴

An initial understanding of this British literary tradition and its translation into Anglo-American form by two influential practitioners, Poe and Hawthorne, demonstrates just how profoundly assumptions regarding Catholicism informed the literature of the antebellum United States. These foundational texts and authors also demonstrate that the Gothic, originating as it did in an age marked by a perceived crisis of authority, is frequently concerned with questions of historiography. Whereas many nineteenth-century English-language novels—beginning perhaps with those of Jane Austen—tended toward mimetic realism and overt didacticism, the Gothic's often seemingly fantastical fictions embraced ambiguity and challenged predominant Anglo-American cultural assumptions: they rejected a narrative of history as inevitably progressive and often depicted the ultimate inability of the autonomous intellect to author an accurate history, or, more broadly, to read or write the truth. Contrary to the Reformation tenet of *sola scriptura* and the Enlightenment tenet of *sola ratio* alike, early Gothic fictions emphasized that the truth is more complicated than any single formulation of it read or written out in black and white by an earnest individual.²⁵

The Castle of Otranto, universally acknowledged as the first Gothic novel in English, exemplifies these patterns and prefigures much later Anglo-American Gothic fiction. The novel was written by the son of Sir Robert Walpole, the de facto first prime minister of Great Britain. A zealous Whig, Walpole was a member of that ascendant party that at mid-eighteenth century wished to erase even the memory of two centuries of religious strife that had ended a generation previous with the succession of

William and Mary. But the question remained: what in fact legitimated Britain's increasingly parliamentary government, along with the accompanying rise of the mercantile class and of capitalism generally? Walpole and his Whig colleagues attempted to ground their burgeoning rule—including its entrenched anti-Catholic laws—in the myth of a piecemeal native constitution, sometimes deemed a “Saxon” or “Gothic” constitution, that reached back to the Magna Carta and was perceived as a “bulwark” of the democratic and therefore fundamentally “Protestant freedoms” that had finally prevailed for good in the Glorious Revolution.²⁶ In *The Castle of Otranto*, however, Robert Walpole's son Horace suggested that history was not necessarily such a neat narrative of inevitable moral progress—that it perhaps remained a crude power struggle marked as much by might as by right, and that present prosperity was inevitably built on past wrongs.

Walpole's novel about a powerful family's hidden history “dwells obsessively on illegitimacy and usurpation, on gaps and ruptures,” in that history. Hence *The Castle of Otranto*, though set in medieval Italy, can ultimately be read as a critique of eighteenth-century Whig rule: while in public Horace Walpole upheld his father's “political image,” in his fiction “he dons the garb of the family's ancestral [Catholic] enemies and turns assassin” by effectively calling all political authority into question. He does so in a complex manner. “It's not just that [in the novel the ruling patriarch's] attitude toward divorce unhappily recalls Henry VIII and the Reformation or that the plot concerns usurpation”; in fact, “the theme of illegitimate possession pervades all aspects” of the novel, including the way the narrative not only turns on the discovery of a falsified will but also insistently points to the likelihood of its own “textual fakery.”²⁷ For Walpole initially published *The Castle of Otranto* under a pseudonym, masquerading as the translator of the work of a supposed Counter-Reformation Italian priest who is in turn presented as the likely forger of the primary narrative, a tale set at the time of the Crusades. This priest's tale is so offensive to the modern mind, the faux-translator warns his readers in a lengthy preface, that it was likely intended to confirm its original Italian readers in their Catholic superstitions: “[its] principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of Christianity.”²⁸ In its self-questioning framing device and in Walpole's preface to the second edition, which forthrightly defends what one critic deems the text's apparent “generic miscegenation,” this

prototypical Gothic fiction highlights those questions regarding the nature of authority—that is, textual authorship and interpretation as well as political legitimacy—that were so central to that most foundational of early modern events, the Reformation.²⁹ This fact is highlighted again at the novel's conclusion when the deposed patriarch and his wife, stripped of all worldly power, are effectively forced to “take on the habit of religion” and disappear into monastic communities adjoining their former realm.³⁰

Read in historical context, then, the major question raised by *The Castle of Otranto* and its violent tale of usurpation becomes: what is the proper basis of ultimate authority? If not the Roman Catholic Church or the divine right of kings, can parliamentary representation be trusted to be much better—particularly when it seems to replace Christian tradition only with imperialistic nationalism, and when rule of the nation-state appears to be grounded only in the calculating wills of self-interested individuals (at this time, of propertied white males)? Walpole and other early Gothic authors see their “characters and readers as torn between the enticing call of aristocratic wealth and sensuous Catholic splendor, beckoning back toward the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, on the one hand, and a desire to overthrow these past orders of authority in favor of a quasi-equality associated with the rising middle-class ideology of the self as self-made, on the other—but an ideology haunted by the Protestant bourgeois desire to *attain* the power of the older orders that the middle class wants to dethrone.”³¹

Diane Long Hoeveler foregrounds these concerns as she characterizes the early British Gothic, in the wake of *Otranto*, as seeking, in effect, to exorcise the Christian past:

The rise of an Enlightenment ideology made possible the growth of capitalism, nationalism, and secularization, all of which privileged individualism, the private over the public display of spirituality, and the reading of the word itself rather than its interpretation by a priest. But to transform a society in this way, to move it from an oral to a print-based culture, to uproot traditional ways of doing and living and being could not have been easy or painless. . . . The killing of Catholicism in England took more than two hundred years, and the gothic charts that murder in all its convoluted moves. Killing the king becomes in

the gothic the killing of a corrupt duke or monk, while the rationality so highly prized by Protestant individualism and Enlightenment ideology moves to center stage, creating a new cultural ideal that chastised idolatry, superstition, hierarchy, and popery in all its forms. . . . The gothic [therefore] charts the death of the old world of Catholicism, communalism, feudalism, and the rise in its place of the Protestant subject, individual, modern, secular.³²

By the late eighteenth century, an idealized version of this new and only nominally “Protestant” subject had become a veritable “object of worship”—the new “social and cultural divinity” in Britain. Though broadly representative of “the modern individual,” this subject or self was figured as “middle class, white,” and “male.”³³ Such figuring was a function of the fact that in this milieu “women, people of color and the lower classes” were perceived as exemplifying a radically “embodied subjectivity” and therefore lacking full “agency”: “they were born to fulfill” specific “social roles,” as their bodies “determined who and what they could be and become.” Hence, they were seen as incapable of fully modern selfhood. Yet this figuring is not properly understood as only a function of racism and sexism. It was a function of “Enlightenment beliefs” that defined “the self as unitary, reasonable, and located somewhere above and beyond the body.” At the time middle-class white males seemed the “putative norm” for such “universal subjectivity” because they were the only individuals deemed capable of attaining such a desirable state.³⁴

Such was the dominant Enlightenment construct that informed the nascent Gothic. Hoeveler rightly stresses, however, that it would be a mistake to deem the Gothic an “Enlightenment genre.” Multiple scholars have observed how Gothic fiction essentially plays on the fear that neat rational dichotomies—between mind and body, male and female, white and black, good and evil, living and dead, present and past—might somehow break down. In the early Anglo-American Gothic, “Protestant”—or, better, “secular”—generally corresponds to the first and putatively positive of these opposed categories (mind, male, white, living, present), “Catholic” to the second and putatively negative ones (body, female, black, dead, past). But in this milieu Catholicism, like the Gothic itself, is also associated with the complete breakdown of such dichotomies, with a horrifying

intermingling between seemingly opposed states of being, and, accordingly, with ambiguity. This includes, as in *Otranto*, a narrative ambiguity that implicitly critiques the monolithic mythmaking on which nationalism inevitably depends.³⁵

Gothic complications of seemingly black-and-white narratives of national identity were particularly vexing in a modernity in which print culture itself was largely responsible for creating the newly “imagined communities” that were nation-states. Daily newspapers and other periodicals had begun to connect otherwise disparate readers into a loose “spiritual fraternity” of citizens that in some respects served to replace a Church declining in influence.³⁶ Literate citizens increasingly understood themselves as “individuals who used their reason” to escape “the artificial worlds of the aristocratic and peasant classes” alike: for them, “reason was the attribute of individuals, while imagination was the attribute of groups,” groups perceived as inherently restrictive.³⁷ Bourgeois citizens of the newly imagined communities that were nation-states chose, paradoxically, to imagine that imagination and community alike were in large part things of the past—the essence of “chaotic tradition” from which they, as modern individuals, had escaped. From the perspective of the Anglo-Americans who would triumphantly articulate U.S. identity, allegiance to such tradition seemed to have kept Latin Catholics and “Indians” alike from forming “real nations” in the Americas.³⁸ As they saw it, true individuals and a true nation sprung into existence in the Americas only “when middle class Anglo-Americans in 1776 rejected the English king.” They did so via the Declaration of Independence, a text intended to be utterly unambiguous and transparently accessible to the individual via naked reason—that same reason through which the individual could “achieve an artless and classless relationship with nature,” a nature that he ultimately came to see as granting him freedom to dominate it.³⁹

Fiction itself depends, of course, less on reason than on imagination—and also on “groups” or tradition, on some degree of communion with predecessors. In the new nation that produced Thomas Jefferson’s eminently rational Declaration, who would look to British literary tradition and imagine an American version of *The Castle of Otranto*? That tradition itself was one in flux. Before 1825, British Gothic novels sought the formal affect of “terror or horror” via conventions of character and plot, “scene

and atmosphere,” and “operatic use of language and dialogue” to such a degree that they can be seen as a consistent genre; soon, however, a wide variety of British novels and short stories would incorporate single aspects of the Gothic, or “some unpredictable combination” of them, without being immediately or reductively identifiable as Gothic texts themselves.⁴⁰ Accordingly, Gothic fiction in the United States, typically dated as beginning with Charles Brockden Brown, emerged less as a genre than as a flexible literary mode, “an innovative and experimental literature” of “dazzling originality and diversity.”⁴¹ Over time, “American writers increasingly came to strike the Gothic note in macabre detailing rather than by invoking the [original] genre *in toto*.”⁴² They ultimately created a tradition of their own, so that writers such as Faulkner, McCarthy, and Morrison would be “keenly celebratory of their dark antecedents” in the nineteenth-century United States.⁴³ Foremost among those antecedents was Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote the Gothic indelibly into the national canon.

Poe’s own imaginative development depended on Atlantic crossings, both literal and figurative. He spent a crucial five years of his childhood in Britain and the rest in Virginia, where he attended Jefferson’s new university and experienced a slaveholding society that—despite certain faux-feudal elements—was both definitively modern and definitively American. Poe’s mature work would draw on all aspects of his experience even as it often responded to his U.S. audience’s reservations regarding the European Catholic past in fairly obvious ways. If the Reformation, Enlightenment, and opening of the Western Hemisphere had offered enterprising Anglo-American individuals apparent liberation from the medieval past—room to breathe in, open space—then Poe was aware that Catholicism might seem to threaten to lock them back up: in castles and cathedrals, monasteries and abbeys, dungeons and confessional booths, all figurative coffins. Poe suggested this most flagrantly and systematically in “The Pit and the Pendulum,” a captivity narrative set during the Spanish Inquisition, and “The Masque of the Red Death,” a tale of decadent and diseased aristocrats—of both moral and bodily corruption—set in a “castellated abbey” in Europe. He deployed the same fears more sporadically in fictions such as “The Black Cat,” wherein the narrator kills his wife and walls up her corpse, he tells us, “much as the monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims.”⁴⁴ Yet Poe did not merely cater to the prejudices

of his audience. “The Black Cat” and stories such as “William Wilson” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” finally offer less reason to fear medieval or European authorities than the quintessentially modern and willfully autonomous individuals—democrats? Americans?—who serve as the criminal and significantly unreliable narrators of these tales, often inadvertently calling their own veracity into question. Via murder and other means, Poe’s modern individuals seek to deny and escape an embodiment that they perceive as limiting and associate not only with Catholicism but also with the feminine. The hypersensitive intellectual Roderick Usher, who fears all sensual experience, is a prime exemplar as he buries his cataleptic twin sister alive in “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

Imaginatively yoking Catholicism with the world of matter—the world known by the body—and the feminine alike was not uncommon in Poe’s antebellum milieu.⁴⁵ His contemporary Hawthorne linked female bodies to the faith explicitly in *The Scarlet Letter* as he introduced Hester Prynne clutching her illegitimate daughter atop a public scaffold: “Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman . . . with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity.”⁴⁶ Prynne—whose scarlet “A” in part signifies Ambiguity—initially appears, then, as a dark Madonna. She is also oddly nun-like at points in the novel and is in effect held captive in New England, which in *The Scarlet Letter* is hardly characterized by the bright typological narrative the Puritan fathers wished to write for it. Hawthorne’s introduction to that novel, “The Custom-House,” explicitly highlights questions of historiography and authority, and his oeuvre emphasizes American settings more obviously than Poe’s. In Hawthorne’s work, it is typically not abbeys or castles but woods that appear as haunted—often by the ideas or acts of his own dissenting Protestant ancestors. Hawthorne wrote much more explicitly of Christianity than Poe did, creating a “doctrinally ambivalent” fiction that increasingly focused on Catholicism as U.S. Protestantism’s most intimate other.⁴⁷ While he clearly saw the Catholic Church as flawed, he was primarily concerned with exploring flaws in his own Anglo-American culture, including its tendency to denigrate the Mother of God, whom he saw venerated during his travels in Europe. The many images of the “divine woman” in Hawthorne’s fiction in part represent a direct challenge to “the masculine symbol system” that

the author had “inherited from the theology of his Puritan-Unitarian forebears.”⁴⁸ He and Poe alike therefore demonstrated both continuities with and divergence from the British Gothic tradition, inheriting and transforming that tradition just as their own literary legatees would do.

WRITING CATHOLICISM IN U.S. GOTHIC FICTION:
“METAPHYSICAL RIDDLES” OF SELF AND OTHER

As the work of Poe and Hawthorne suggests, four factors distinguished early formulations of the Gothic in the United States from the British model: slavery, the frontier, the Puritan legacy, and the young nation’s susceptibility to utopian visions and accompanying dystopian fears. All of these factors contributed to a pronounced tendency toward “Manichean formulations of good and evil” in the emergent United States.⁴⁹ Broadly speaking, “Manichean” belief signifies a simplistic moral dualism and as such neatly corresponds with the Enlightenment dichotomies outlined in Hoeveler’s work above. These are evident with regard to gender, for example, in early U.S. Gothic fiction’s tendency to associate masculinity with virtuous self-control and to manifest an accompanying “fear of the feminine” as inherently uncontrollable.⁵⁰ “Manichean” habits of thought have also been identified as supporting rigid racial categorization in British American colonies that defined themselves in pronounced opposition to Spain, a Catholic nation popularly associated with moral corruption and miscegenation in Europe and the Americas alike.⁵¹ Early Anglo-American Protestants, that is, were prone to be broadly Manichean not only in that they defined themselves against evil Catholic Spaniards but also precisely in that they saw themselves (opposite the Spaniards) as maintaining a proper binary separation between the races, between good “white” and depraved “black” or otherwise nonwhite. This pattern, as we shall see, informs a number of Gothic fictions concerned with borders between races—as well as between Anglo-Protestant and Latin cultures in the United States and the Americas more broadly.

What is finally at issue here, however, is not gender, race, or ethnic identity. These fictions do generally—though not always—figure the willfully autonomous individual as an Anglo-American male. One might argue

that this is because “the very ‘social contract’ at the heart of liberal political theory both bears within it and produces structures of patriarchal power and white supremacy.”⁵² As I see it, however, the social contract at the heart of liberal political theory bears within it and produces desire for *individual* power and supremacy—insofar as such power and supremacy seem essential to achieving or maintaining individual autonomy. As noted above in a British context, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the ideal modern “subject” or self—the rational self not limited by embodiment, and therefore potentially autonomous—was indeed figured as white and male.⁵³ For much of U.S. history only such individuals were deemed capable of autonomy; accordingly, the Gothic fictions considered here tend to depict Anglo-American males as most diligently seeking it and most susceptible to the illusion that they might attain it. What these fictions are ultimately concerned with, however, is the radical hope that the United States can enable the emergence of the autonomous individual per se, the individual who like the nation itself has righteously and triumphantly escaped past limitations, among which might conceivably be any particular racial, ethnic, or gender identity.⁵⁴ Correspondingly, these fictions to varying degrees demonstrate a concern with Manichaeism proper, which is not merely a synonym for moralistic dualism. Manichaeism, rather, is a form of Gnosticism, an ancient belief system that professes that the material world is evil—seemingly designed by some lesser god or demiurge—and that the individual must seek escape from that limiting world and access a higher one through acquisition of hidden knowledge possessed by an elect few. The most fundamental dualism in Manichaeism or in Gnosticism generally, then, is that between the world of matter (including the human body and all of nature) and the world of spirit or intellect.

Gnosticism may seem an obscure religious perspective, one that obviously predates the United States.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, it has been identified by a wide range of scholars as relevant to the nation. Deneen includes a “Gnostic” tradition of “belief that humans can bring about their own salvation in some form” among several that provide the unacknowledged “theological underpinnings” of the democratic faith unconsciously held by many citizens of the United States.⁵⁶ Harold Bloom has deemed a democratized Gnosticism the true “American religion” in a United States that is essentially “post-Christian,” celebrating it as the creed of Ralph Waldo Emerson

and Walt Whitman even as he occasionally regrets its political effects (e.g., its intermittent manifestation in Manichean foreign policy that simplistically divides the world between American good and un-American evil).⁵⁷ Bloom ties Gnosticism in the United States directly to the legacy of dissenting Protestantism; Presbyterian scholar Philip J. Lee does so as well, albeit not in celebratory fashion, in *Against the Protestant Gnostics*.⁵⁸ Insofar as Calvinism stressed a radical division between divine grace and fallen nature, to be sure, it has often been identified as fostering a perception of the body and the world known by the body as antagonistic to proper human desire—that is, the desire for individual salvation, conceived of as a purely spiritual freedom. In Manichaeism proper, the world known by the body is so antagonistic that it seems diabolically designed and governed. Whether via Puritan influence or otherwise, such a view helped to shape the early U.S. culture that produced “Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe,” who, “like all true Gothic writers, believed that evil was a real and active force in our lives” and whose characters confront a world that often seems combatively engaged in imprisoning the self and invites combat in return.⁵⁹

Again, the fictions considered here are in one sense a function of hope—the radical hope that the United States can enable the emergence of the autonomous individual who like the nation itself has righteously and triumphantly escaped past limitations. Such a hope can itself be deemed Manichean insofar as it identifies the true self, that “divine spark” that in essence *is* the individual, as trapped in a world of matter and accompanying social bonds from which it must separate itself to attain freedom—a freedom conceived as depending on both intellectual certainty and mastery over any opposing “other,” including individuals, peoples, and the natural world itself. The Gothic fictions considered here counter this radical hope that the individual might attain such freedom with the radical fear that he will not; at times, they also present some deeply troubling desire within the individual to embrace or merge with that from which he generally seeks to escape and bound himself. An invasive or otherwise alien Catholicism is vital to these narratives because it appears both as signifying some potential denial of individual freedom and as source of troubling, if not enslaving, desire. In turn, things identified with the denial of individual freedom or as sources of troubling desire—including the natural world and the human body itself—are here figured as explicitly Catholic or in language sugges-

tive of Catholicism. To put it most simply: in these fictions a limitation and suffering (including passion) presumably foreign to the United States is associated with Catholicism, whether Catholicism is seen as inflicting such limitation and suffering or as simply embodying it.

“Catholicism” might itself be deemed a broad term. Yet in this fiction, written primarily for a U.S. audience conceived of as overwhelmingly Protestant or post-Protestant, Catholicism appears in ways that are often fairly self-evident. It is represented most readily by reference to consecrated Catholic religious figures—monks, nuns, priests, the pope—or artifacts such as Church vestments or architecture. Relatedly, it is represented by “foreign” cultures or settings that have historically or otherwise been marked by conspicuous Catholic belief. These are most often Latin cultures or settings, whether in Europe or in the Americas, and they tend to appear as simultaneously medieval and multiracial. Catholicism also appears—sometimes more subtly—as worship or practice, often by way of reference to the sacraments, which necessarily involve the body. The sacrament of Eucharist above all appears as distinctively Catholic. Given its emphasis on sacramental life and on aesthetics alike, the faith also often appears here as seeming idolatry—a form of misleading artifice—and accordingly as manifesting a disturbingly pre-modern irrationality and superstition that is rendered “pagan” as much as it is “medieval.” In its very complexity, its seeming multiplicity, Catholicism is associated with a troubling ambiguity—a pattern in Anglophone literature that dates at least to Edmund Spenser’s post-Reformation epic *The Faerie Queene*, in which the darkly duplicitous “Catholic” Duessa vies against the simple truth represented by “Protestant” Una. (Indeed, Spenser’s overtly allegorical poem—which endorsed Queen Elizabeth’s emergent English nation in the name of Protestant Christianity—was much studied by Hawthorne and Melville and thereby indirectly helped to establish in U.S. Gothic fiction an association of Catholicism with “duplicitous” reading.)⁶⁰

Catholicism’s role in relation to borders in these fictions is also helpfully understood with reference to the long-dominant psychoanalytical perspective on the Gothic, that of Julia Kristeva. Her influential study *Powers of Horror* directly poses the pointed question: “How can I be without border?” Kristeva posits that the individual psyche, in order to define itself, must erect borders—must “abject” (i.e., throw away, off, or under)

that within itself which “disturbs identity, system, order.” What most disturbs the psyche and therefore must be rendered abject is that in its own experience—particularly bodily experience—which is perceived to be “in-between,” “ambiguous,” or “composite.” Nonetheless, that which is rendered abject constantly haunts the borders of the self, “is something rejected from which one does not part”: “Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.”⁶¹ Scholarship on Gothic literature generally holds that it manifests Kristevan abjection as protagonists attempt to cast off perceived “fundamental inconsistencies” that prevent the psyche “from declaring a coherent and independent identity”—that is, from asserting an autonomous individuality. The “most primordial” such inconsistency, the most primordial experience of being “in-between,” is “the multiplicity we viscerally remember from the moment of birth, at which we were both inside and outside of the mother.” To the modern individual, this experience corresponds to being both “dead” and alive, respectively: “Whatever threatens us with anything like this betwixt-and-between . . . is what we throw off or ‘abject’ into defamiliarized manifestations, which we henceforth fear and desire because they both threaten to reengulf us and promise to return us to our primal origins.” Gothic fiction abounds with such “othered figures” that “reveal this deeply familiar foundation while ‘throwing it under’ the cover of . . . ghostly or monstrous counterparts.” Such figures often convey “overtones of the archaic and the alien in their grotesque mixture of elements viewed as incompatible” in the dominant culture.⁶²

In a Western modernity that has a vexed relationship with the faith that helped bring it into being, the Church—traditionally figured as maternal—can be seen as the ultimate abject mother. Furthermore, the Eucharist that is essential to that Church can seem a “grotesque mixture” of spirit and flesh, a “monstrous” reminder of our own inevitable embodiment in a cosmos in which even the Transcendent is bound to a suffering body. Kristeva’s own oeuvre indirectly suggests as much. Since *Powers of Horror*, she has written extensively and appreciatively regarding both the Eucharist and Catholic mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila; in 2011, she—an unbeliever—accepted an invitation by Benedict XVI to speak at Assisi regarding the need for a more profound and mutually respectful dialogue between Christianity and contemporary “humanism” in the West.⁶³ From

the beginning, Kristeva has presented her psychoanalytical approach as not unrelated to either religion or historical context: "Abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse."⁶⁴ So it is that Gothic fiction—emerging in conjunction with the rise of the nation-state and seeming collapse of Christendom—"reminds" its modern readers that despite the Enlightenment they might not achieve individual autonomy, "that something like a return to the confusion and loss of identity in being half-inside and half-outside the mother . . . may await us behind any old foundation, paternal or otherwise, on which we try, by breaking it up, to build a brave new world."⁶⁵ Hence in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States alike, "Protestantism's Catholic past," a cast-off mother of sorts, often "haunts the present" in Gothic narratives "as the uncanny, manifested in monsters both literal and metaphoric."⁶⁶

Citizens of the emergent United States, however, had more extravagant hopes than Britons for creating "a brave new world," and therefore more extravagant fears. Building on Kristeva's work and on D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Eric Savoy outlines how such citizens came into existence. Representative citizens such as Benjamin Franklin, he argues, created a "national ideology" premised on a figurative border beyond which was cast a "strange and fugitive self"—a self "repudiated by the enlightened and forward-looking American psyche." This fugitive self is "radically excluded," "banished, haunting the border of life": it "has the lowly status of the 'object'" and is therefore forced to inhabit a "location for throwing off the psyche's *and* a culture's most basic drives, the ones most in need of repression." This location is in every respect a border region, "a domain of impossibility and uninhabitability, associated with betwixt-and-between conditions where death keeps invading life, into which the normative American subject must cast the irrational, the desire unacceptable to consciousness," locating "it 'over there' in some frightening incarnation of the always inaccessible Real." This border, he argues, is essential to U.S. identity because "it is precisely this consignment or repudiation" of the fugitive self there "that enables the subject to emerge *as* a coherent national subject, a proper citizen of the republic, by contrast to that other."⁶⁷

Yet in early U.S. Gothic fiction, such proper citizens of the republic ultimately find their national identity unsustainable. Savoy rightly characterizes that fiction as "essentially conservative," raising "doubts about the

ability of individuals to govern themselves in a full-fledged democracy” in which they “have no authorities available to tell them what to do, what to believe, how to act.”⁶⁸ They are doomed particularly in their willful blindness to the inevitable impact of (communal) past on (individual) present—an impact often dramatized in familial relationships that serve as radical checks to notions of individual autonomy. Savoy explicates these relationships primarily with reference to fathers and to Freud; Kristeva’s emphasis on the maternal, however, provides a better framework for understanding this pattern with regard to Catholicism. In the fictions I consider here, the “fugitive self” in the borderlands of the United States approaches the Eucharist or some maternal figure who is associated with or suggestive of the Church—and who simultaneously, as mother, serves as unwelcome reminder of the willfully autonomous individual’s embodiment, of her place in the natural world.

That world is generally portrayed in these fictions as haunted or horrific, inherently bound up with suffering and limitation, and is marked as implicitly or explicitly “Catholic” precisely in this regard. Gothic representations of the U.S. “wilderness” as “heathen” and “unredeemed” have long been identified as originating in colonial Puritan writings that largely depicted “the American forest” as “a realm of evil.”⁶⁹ The Puritans also vigorously associated Catholicism with evil, of course, yet language that associated Catholicism with evil in the natural world endured in North American culture well beyond their day—sometimes in surprising ways. In the late nineteenth century, John Fiske, a Harvard-educated philosopher who helped to popularize Darwinism, could write: “Nature is full of cruelty and maladaptation. In every part of the animal world we find implements of torture surpassing in devilish ingenuity anything that was seen in the dungeons of the Inquisition.”⁷⁰ To Fiske’s audience, “the Inquisition” was intrinsically linked to a barbaric Spanish Catholicism; startlingly, his remark suggests that nature’s cruelty is best understood by reference to such Catholic impositions on individual freedom and privacy. I will demonstrate how such linkages between the natural world and a violence or suffering associated with Catholicism appear in the fictions of writers from Crèvecoeur on, often strangely permeating the U.S. Gothic imagination even as it “warns us to fear the non-human, to dread the vengeance of animals and the environment.” Most powerfully of all, this fiction warns us

“to dread the horrific fact that our bodies and minds are entwined with the land itself and will eventually decompose back into it.”⁷¹ The natural world itself resembles the Church as it becomes the abject mother—that most fundamental “other” from which the individual wishes to separate himself in order to assert autonomy, and which he must dominate in order to do so.⁷²

This is ultimately futile, for the human body itself is part of the natural world. As René Descartes illustrated (and Americans are prone to mirror him in this regard, according to Alexis de Tocqueville), the mind can indeed affirm that it exists in isolation, independent and sufficient unto itself: *cogito, ergo sum*.⁷³ The body, by contrast, is in constant and necessary communion with a larger outside world: the world of air and water as well as other organic bodies, beginning with the maternal body—a world in which rigid boundaries of the sort formulated and favored by the analytical mind finally do not exist. Any religion that insistently implicates the body in its practice therefore tends to foster communion across abstractly conceived borders, including political borders, in a way that a private and interiorized religion of *sola fide* does not.⁷⁴ Catholicism perhaps most fundamentally challenges borders, then, via its emphasis on the body—for example, on the body’s centrality in the reception of grace via the sacraments, on embodied representations of the crucified Christ and the saints, and on its longstanding teachings regarding the roots of knowledge in sense experience and the spiritual efficacy of corporal works.⁷⁵ This emphasis on the body is ultimately altogether consistent with the manner in which Catholic teaching challenges notions of permanent, impermeable borders between nations and racial or ethnic groups. It challenges those notions via essential doctrines regarding the sacramental unity of the universal Church as well as specific documents such as John Paul II’s *Ecclesia in America*, which describes the “*mestiza* face” of the Virgin of Guadalupe as rightfully belonging to the Americas at large.⁷⁶ Such a face was first recognized in part because sixteenth-century Spanish “neoscholastics” articulated an “organic conception of a divinely ordained society dedicated to the achievement of the common good” and thereby fostered American colonies that—however imperfect—were relatively “inclusive,” characterized by certain “compromises” with indigenous peoples. By contrast, “exclusionary” and entrepreneurial English settlers kept strange bodies at a safe distance in their America.

Steadfastly refusing “to include Indians and Africans within the boundaries of their imagined communities” gave those English settlers “more freedom of manoeuvre to make reality conform to the constructs of their [individual] imaginations”—that is, greater autonomy, enabled by separation between themselves and any constricting other.⁷⁷ The fundamental role of the body in regard to such borders between self and other is to varying degrees known or intuited by the writers I have chosen here.

Implicit in my argument is the premise that the Gothic, even while foregrounding ambiguity and avoiding overt didacticism, often has some moral function. Others have recognized that function, including scholars in recent decades who have plausibly read Gothic fictions in the United States as dwelling on ethically flawed formulations of race and gender. My own goal, however, is not to read the Gothic with an eye to replacing “race” and “gender” with “religion” as a sociopolitical category. To varying degrees, the authors I have chosen are aware of and respond to such categories but see their fictions as addressing questions that are more fundamentally existential and ontological—if not always theological—in nature. These authors operate much as Fyodor Dostoevsky did, utilizing “the thematic and scenic commonplaces” of the Gothic to pose profound “metaphysical riddles.” They take up what has sometimes been seen as a merely titillating mode of fiction and demonstrate how “the language of the Gothic novel and its themes,” when given a “strong moral cast,” can offer “a powerful rhetoric for describing modern man’s predicament.”⁷⁸ Most consistently, the authors considered here depict representatively American individuals who exemplify or explore the limits of a modern Manichaeism. Their characters are drawn to a view of reality that is not only radically dualistic in its approach to human identity and experience—a view that necessitates forming and maintaining rigid borders—but also posits an essential hostility between the individual human spirit or intellect and the world of nature. Whatever its source, this view is undeniably central to a proper understanding of the literature surveyed here. It emerges as a concern in the work of writers of Protestant background and of Catholic background or conviction alike: in Melville and Faulkner, in Crèvecoeur and Chopin and McCarthy, in Percy and O’Connor. All depict the desire to draw a firm border between self and nature, as well as self and other generally, as frequently and problematically characteristic of the United States.

Each of the texts I consider in this study should be understood at least partly in light of the early Gothic patterns established in eighteenth-century Britain, and each plays a vital role in a developing U.S. Gothic tradition. Borders between nations have one essential role in that tradition. In the project as a whole, however, I finally speak of borders in a broader sense, borders drawn by the Anglo-Protestant settlers who created their nation's predominant cultural narrative: borders between their hemisphere and that of Europe, between their nation and other nations of the Americas, between their minds and nature, including bodies they had mastered as well as bodies that were different—bodies potentially rebellious or threatening even in their potential embrace. In the U.S. Gothic fictions under consideration here, Catholicism is imagined as breaking down such rigidly conceived borders. Those borders represent some recurrent will within the nation to dichotomize mind and body, individual and community, present and past, innocence and guilt, “masculine” self-reliance and “feminine” receptivity, white and black, Anglo-American “purity” and Latin “impurity.” Some of the authors considered here display a more explicit concern with historiography and national mythmaking, as in *The Castle of Otranto*, than others. But ultimately, collectively, all of these Gothic texts write the confrontation with Catholicism in such a way as to challenge a myth of Anglo-American exceptionalism that features the United States and its representative citizen, the self-reliant individual, as righteously and masterfully escaping the tainted past. That myth itself can be deemed potentially more altruistic than Huntington's narrative—that is, it can posit the United States not merely as superior but also as potential savior to the rest of the world—yet it inevitably mirrors his approbatory emphasis on the Reformation and Enlightenment roots of the United States. Indeed, the myth was solidified in the minds of a leading “generation of Anglo-Protestant men born about 1800 in the United States” who “shared the vision of the Prussian G.W.F. Hegel that only a particular nation could lead the exodus from a lower to a higher civilization,” that “such an exemplary nation would be Protestant,” and that “it was the Germanic peoples alone who had rejected the Catholic past and opted for the Protestant future.”⁷⁹ All of the fictions considered here respond to this enduring myth of the Anglo-Protestant United States as an exemplary and salvific nation in relation to a rightly abject Catholicism. Some deconstruct it only to present

a tragic counter-narrative of enduring doom and despair; a few suggest a comic corrective to it; many display a primary concern with the ultimate fate of individual human beings and the larger human family as distinct from the fate of the nation-state.

In other words, some merely construct “anti-myths against the myth of American exceptionalism,” while others not only smash the false idol of the nation-state but also point in relation to Catholicism to some greater good that should be worshiped in its place.⁸⁰ To be sure, Catholicism itself was experienced differently by each of these authors, and their degrees of engagement with the faith are by no means equivalent. Yet even those who left the Church or had no direct experience of it often sense in Catholicism, as Melville finally did, a call to “a communitarian ethic rather than an individualistic ethic” and the potential “to identify Christ with the oppressed in every culture, using a central element of Catholic spirituality, meditation on the sufferings of Jesus, to create a universal sense of solidarity with the suffering.”⁸¹ Each presents in relation to Catholicism some counterpoint to the figure of the triumphantly autonomous self: a hierarchical or relational reality in which the embodied individual is finally not master; an experience of being enmeshed in community and history, which inevitably entails guilt and moral culpability; and a deep sense of incompleteness within the self, properly marked by a suffering passion not entirely unrelated to *eros*.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

The vast majority of writers born before 1900 who have been enshrined in the U.S. literary canon sprang from an Anglo-Protestant background. My first chapter offers a reappraisal of one vital exception to that rule: J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, whose *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) has rightly been identified as foundational to the U.S. Gothic tradition, but whose religious identity has been almost altogether ignored. The epistolary narrator of Crèvecoeur’s *Letters*, one “Farmer James,” is a provincial British colonist, nominal Protestant, and de facto Deist, long read as a simple mouthpiece for the author. Yet Crèvecoeur himself was born into the French Catholic petty aristocracy, educated by Jesuits in Normandy,

and spent his first years in North America in Quebec. While scholars have increasingly recognized and explored the narrative complexity of *Letters from an American Farmer*, they have failed to attend to its central concern with religious identity, instead focusing primarily on race as the axis on which the text turns from an early utopian vision of British America to a late dystopian one. I demonstrate how James's account in Letter I of his neighboring Protestant minister—who spurs him to write all that follows—introduces the text's fundamental concern with literacy, historiography, and unwelcomed ambiguity in relation to Catholicism. This framework proves crucial to understanding the connection of Christianity and American borders in James's emergently Gothic vision in those portions of *Letters* that are most widely studied and anthologized. In Letter III James praises the “self-interest” and “religious indifference” of the “new man” developing in the pastoral middle colonies of British America, but simultaneously paints a horrific picture of a western frontier where un-churched and radically individualistic settlers seem little better than “carnivorous animals.” Direct references to transubstantiation subtly connect these dual aspects of Letter III, foreshadowing James's otherwise incongruous use of Eucharistic imagery in describing the body of a tortured slave at the close of Letter IX. There James describes a South Carolina that initially seems a simulacrum of a quasi-feudal Peru but ultimately exemplifies the very same characteristics that he earlier praised in the capitalist middle colonies. Examination of Crèvecoeur's unpublished writings on Spanish America supports this analysis and situates his work in a larger hemispheric context. So, too, does Crèvecoeur's negative view of an emergent American exceptionalism during the Revolution as suggested in both his closet drama *Landscapes* and his crucial role in opening the first Catholic church in New York City—a parish that soon served Caribbean immigrants as well as the first Catholic saint born in British America, Elizabeth Ann Seton, whose father-in-law had initially encouraged Crèvecoeur to publish *Letters from an American Farmer*.

Chapter 2, “Melville's ‘Monkish Fables,’” builds on established scholarship demonstrating that Melville—like Poe and, to a degree, Hawthorne—wrote Gothic fictions that “consistently undermine the anti-Catholicism they invoke,” not only in order “to mock the nativist susceptibilities of the reading public but, in so doing, to question the very pretensions of narrative.”⁸² Melville did so most obviously in his 1855 novella *Benito Cereno*,

rewriting Poe, Walpole, Lewis, and Radcliffe in a forthrightly Gothic narrative set aboard a seemingly haunted Spanish slave ship off the coast of Latin America, a ship that strangely resembles a European monastery. This novella's subversive exploration of a foreign Catholic landscape that appears disturbingly unreadable from the United States is, I contend, mirrored in other widely studied Melville texts of the 1850s.⁸³ In those texts, Melville did more than any other major antebellum writer to transport and to translate British Gothic concerns with Catholicism into the Americas. In making this case I give ample consideration to biographical contexts that shaped Melville's perceptions of Catholicism: his international travels, his family's employment of female Irish Catholic domestic servants, and his political awareness regarding the legacy of the Mexican-American War and nativist anxieties in the face of massive waves of Catholic immigration in the 1840s and 1850s. I briefly examine his autobiographical novel *Redburn* before focusing on Gothic representations of Catholicism and American borders in three texts: *Moby-Dick*, with particular attention to the central chapter "The Town-Ho's Story," a figuratively miscegenated tale told in Lima, Peru; "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," which is simultaneously concerned with the legacy of the Knights Templar and nineteenth-century female Catholic immigrants to the United States; and "The Encantadas," a bleak narrative of South America that culminates in the portrayal of a mestiza woman who seems a tragic figure of Marian devotion, if not of Christ himself. Taken as a whole, these fictions demonstrate that Melville consistently imagined a Catholic "America" in Gothic terms even as they present a critical portrait of both American exceptionalism and the archetypal Anglo-American figure of the self-reliant frontiersman—a portrait later taken up by major writers of Gothic fiction in the twentieth century.

Kate O'Flaherty Chopin was born in 1850 into a St. Louis that was itself a gateway to a newly expanded Anglo-American frontier. Her native city had previously been a central hub of France's *La Louisiane*, the region that had nurtured her mother's family and indirectly shaped her own imagination well before she moved downriver to the state of Louisiana in the 1870s. Chapter 3, "Fear, Desire, and Communion in Chopin's Old *La Louisiane*," begins with consideration of "Désirée's Baby," a story widely read as an exemplary U.S. Gothic text. I demonstrate how this story and much of Chopin's oeuvre reveal her deep ambivalence regarding the Car-

tesian individualism identified by Alexis de Tocqueville as particularly characteristic of the United States—and, furthermore, that Chopin's work cannot be read properly without due regard for her experience of Franco-American Catholicism in the lower Mississippi River Valley and Caribbean Rim alike. In reading selections from Chopin's intended late collection *A Vocation and a Voice* and novel *The Awakening* (1899) in relation to the Gothic, I stress Chopin's education by and friendships with the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, giving particular attention to the legacy of the immigrant St. Rose Philippine Duchesne in Missouri. Chopin experienced and wrote into her fiction the radical divide between the hopes for a multiracial French Catholic civilization in North America embodied by Duchesne, on the one hand, and the view of a Louisiana properly subordinate to an Anglo-Protestant United States as represented in the local color fiction of George Washington Cable, on the other. Chopin was, nonetheless, more directly concerned with the fates of individuals than the fates of nations. While *The Awakening* initially seems to proffer Romantic hopes for self-fulfillment via the unfettered individual's relation to nature, that novel and *A Vocation and a Voice* alike ultimately present darker views of nature, views in keeping with the Gothic mode at the post-Darwinian fin-de-siècle. These texts convey the self-defeating nature of radical individualism, whether Romantic or capitalist, in a manner essentially consistent with Catholic social teachings being newly articulated at the time. In fact, Chopin's fictions of unspeakable desire—desire frustrated by the cruelty of Darwinian nature and human divisiveness alike—were most fundamentally shaped by the embodied understanding of *eros* and *agape* communicated to her by the sisters and mothers who first presented to her the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Chapter 4, "Waste Lands, Border Histories, Gothic Frontiers," considers a selection of representative twentieth-century novels set along the southern borders of the United States, with primary attention to William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Walker Percy's *Lancelot* (1977), and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985). In the early twentieth century, understandings of Catholicism and American borders among U.S. writers evolved considerably, as reflected in the hunger for Christian tradition expressed by many modernist expatriates in Europe and in the radical reimagining of Catholicism in the Americas accomplished by Willa Cather. Cather's dual identities as U.S. regionalist and as Francophile appealed directly

to Faulkner, whose early fiction also responded to T. S. Eliot's image of modernity as post-Christian waste land and to the Catholic-inflected modernism of James Joyce. Faulkner's engagement with Catholicism, then, must be understood in relation to his contemporary literary milieu, but also to specific biographical contexts—including his travel in Europe, his more extensive time living in New Orleans, and his ongoing awareness of pronounced anxieties regarding immigration in his native South and throughout the larger United States in the 1920s. I briefly examine concerns with Catholicism and American borders in Faulkner's early fiction and *Light in August* before focusing on *Absalom, Absalom!* Long categorized in somewhat reductive regional terms as a "southern Gothic" novel, more recently admired for its radical interrogation of national borders in the Americas, *Absalom, Absalom!* is in fact properly understood only when its dual engagement with a definitively Catholic Caribbean world and with U.S. Gothic literary tradition is recognized. Faulkner's narrative here insistently juxtaposes a Latin Catholic New Orleans and Haiti with an Anglo-dominated Mississippi, Virginia, and New England. As it does so, it echoes texts by Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville and deconstructs a narrative of Anglo-American exceptionalism that features the larger United States as purifying or righteously escaping a tainted past.

Like *Benito Cereno* and Melville's other narratives of Latin America, Faulkner's novel is explicitly concerned with historiography and demonstrates the ultimate inability of the autonomous individual intellect—figured here as belonging to the putatively self-reliant Anglo-American frontiersman—to author an accurate history. Percy's *Lancelot* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* follow suit in this respect, in their engagement with Catholicism and in their geographical settings along the southern borders of the United States (south Louisiana and the U.S.-Mexico border, respectively). Percy and McCarthy, however, have more explicit and insistent theological concerns than does Faulkner—the former as a convert to Catholicism, the latter as an apparently lapsed Catholic. Writing in a Cold War era shaped by increased apocalyptic anxieties, both employ Eliot's earlier waste land motif and share his fundamental concern with the viability of Christian faith in an era of destructive nationalism. Percy and McCarthy invoke U.S. Gothic tradition with a postmodern self-consciousness even as they, like Dostoevsky, finally utilize the Gothic mode as a means to raise

profound moral and metaphysical questions. *Lancelot* explicitly references Poe and seems in some respects almost a parody of the Gothic, but is finally a confessional novel in the mold of *Notes from Underground*; *Blood Meridian* repeatedly alludes to Melville's fiction and contains overtly supernatural elements, yet its satanic-cum-Nietzschean antagonist raises questions regarding the depths of human depravity worthy of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ultimately, the continued probing of American borders in these novels is complemented by the authors' mutual concern with the problem of mind-body dualism, whether figured as Cartesian or as Manichean.

That concern is also present in the work of Flannery O'Connor, widely recognized as the most distinctively Roman Catholic author in the U.S. canon. When O'Connor, a Georgia native, began publishing in the 1950s, the term "Gothic" was frequently used to describe contemporary authors from her region whose work featured apparently gratuitous violence, physical and psychological abnormalities, and sexual excess; accordingly, she resisted applications of the term to her own fiction. Yet O'Connor embraced Hawthorne wholeheartedly (and Poe halfheartedly) as literary exemplar, and her work in many respects follows earlier U.S. Gothic patterns. It consistently depicts horrific characters who utilize violence in their attempts to assert their own autonomy and enforce their own rigidly conceived intellectual dichotomies—even as the world of matter, and the God whom O'Connor sees as active in that world, ultimately collapses those dichotomies along with the illusion of individual autonomy. O'Connor associates the flaws of her insistently self-reliant characters with modernity and a debased Anglo-Protestantism alike; she posits as their corrective a Catholicism that is at once "foreign" and associated with the natural world. She does so subtly in stories such as "The Artificial Nigger" and "Greenleaf" and more explicitly in "Parker's Back" and "The Displaced Person," the latter of which concerns Catholic immigration. These stories are illuminated in surprising ways by Richard Rodriguez's and Octavio Paz's essays regarding differences between Latin Catholic and Anglo-American habits of thought, suggesting how O'Connor's fictions of the U.S. South can be read in a more broadly American setting. Her ultimate perspective on borders is best understood in relation to her understanding of the sacraments and of pilgrimage. Read alongside contemporary political theology that contrasts theories of globalization with a Christian catholicity that finds its

center in the Eucharist, her fictions are rightly apprehended not as celebrations of violence littered with ironic religious imagery but as narratives of lost seekers called to cross borders—including national borders—by a God whose presence in the world is made known most fully in the Church. Even as her fictions often overtly echo the fears of Catholicism that have characterized the Anglo-American Gothic, they finally overturn them completely, and she is better understood both as a Catholic artist and as a post-1945 U.S. fiction writer when her radical transformation of Gothic tradition is recognized.

The patterns outlined in this study continue to shape the imaginations of writers in the United States today, as I detail in a coda examining how contemporary authors whose imaginations have been profoundly shaped by Catholicism continue to extend U.S. Gothic tradition in fictions that complicate borders in North America. These include Louise Erdrich, whose novels of Catholicism and Ojibwa life are set on reservations near the Canadian border in the upper Midwest; Ron Hansen, whose *Mariette in Ecstasy* is set in a largely Francophone convent near New York's border with Quebec; and, again, Cormac McCarthy, whose *The Road* features both a post-apocalyptic landscape in which nation-states no longer exist and an insistent religious language that emphasizes the permeability of the border between the world of the living and that of the dead. Toni Morrison, who has intermittently identified as Catholic, has written of Catholicism in relation to U.S. Gothic tradition in *Paradise* and, most recently, *A Mercy*. The latter echoes *Benito Cereno* and *Absalom, Absalom!* alike in its depiction of an insistent Protestant Anglo-Dutch trader from colonial New York who seems to lose his innocence in traveling to Catholic Maryland, where he meets a depraved Portuguese plantation owner who prompts him to invest in Caribbean slavery. This protagonist builds a great manor house only to die there, his formerly powerful body fallen prey to disease. The novel ends on a pronounced Gothic note as it is written in the words of one of his slaves—a girl who has been mistaken for the ghost of the Protestant trader, a girl whose words of longing to her lost Lusophone African mother are written on the walls of the manor house. The alphabet she uses has been taught to her, illegally, by a Catholic priest, in part suggesting Morrison's own adolescent interest in a Catholic Church that she found attractive in part because of its emphasis on Latin as a "unifying and universal language."⁸⁴

A Mercy, then, depicts a Catholicism that initially appears as horrific and corrupting but is finally bound up with a potentially saving communal literacy, a literacy that spans national borders even as it highlights the radical artificiality and contingency of such borders in the colonial Americas. In doing so Morrison's novel continues the Gothic tradition that I attempt to trace here. That tradition ultimately demonstrates the complexity of discourse regarding Christianity not only in U.S. literary history but also in the Americas more broadly. Furthermore, it demonstrates the power of fiction both to incorporate and to contribute to different modes of imagination—including the historical, the political, and the theological—as the authors considered here all share a commitment to truth-telling via fiction and respond to a Catholicism that they depict as insistently calling for profound communion across borders.

CONCLUSION: IMAGINING "CHURCH" IN AMERICA

The broadest implications of this study can be illuminated by consideration of one final question: how has "church," defined as the body of believers called to be the Body of Christ, been imagined in America? I want to draw on both theological and literary sources in briefly considering this question, beginning with one novel that directly answers it and simultaneously provides a bright parallel to the darkness of the Gothic—a kind of inverted mirror that can help us to better see the tradition I have outlined here. That novel is Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Like her predecessors and contemporaries from Hawthorne to Faulkner, Cather here eschewed mainstream literary realism, as this novel "seems more like a saint's life or a series of scenes from a stained-glass window than a full-fledged, mimetic narrative."⁸⁵ Unlike the Gothic writers, however, Cather clearly stressed the fruitful presence of the Catholic Church in America rather than its threatening or haunting border status—as certain other novelists have done at various points in U.S. history.⁸⁶ Cather did so as a Protestant, the preeminent example in American literature of such an author expressing some forthright hunger for communion across borders in relation to Catholicism. Her fictional re-creation of the life of the first Catholic archbishop of Santa Fe opens in Rome, features two priests from France, and deals with U.S. territory recently taken from Mexico. Cather's Catholic

Church is in every way a Church at the border, a Church that is in but finally not of the United States, and will receive more extensive attention in chapter 4.

What is most significant here is that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* has proven important to two prominent Protestant theologians considering the complicated relationship between U.S. identity and Christian identity. Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood praise Cather's successful depiction in this novel of "a faithful community" wherein grace is "socially embodied and ethically sustained"—one that finds value in the cultural traditions of many peoples and that opposes the modern West's "Cartesian urge" to "subdue nature for human use."⁸⁷ Using the term "church" as implicitly ecumenical, they identify *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as no less than the "one authentic portrayal of the church in American literature" (and deem it "exceedingly ironic" that this portrayal "is located not in the center but, at least from the complacent perspective of Europe and New England, on the negligible periphery of the Continent, and not in the Protestant but in the Catholic community").⁸⁸ Hauerwas and Wood are interested less in the border status of Cather's authentic church than in its uniqueness—or, to put it differently, in the scarcity of depictions of "church" in U.S. literature at large. That scarcity, as they see it, reflects the fact that individual churches in the United States have failed to properly imagine, embody, and enact what it means to be "church." Put simply, "our major writers have little substantive regard for Christianity because our churches have made it impossible for them to do so": individual churches have "made the gospel of Jesus Christ seem all too much like the gospel of the United States," and "the church" universal has therefore by and large failed to make its "unique and distinctively Christian witness" in this, "the one nation founded almost entirely on an Enlightenment basis."⁸⁹ Hauerwas and Wood, in other words, decry exactly what Huntington values in *Who Are We?*: the general collapse of Christian tradition into a broad "American Creed" that unites the nation.

Christianity in the United States, these two theologians regret, has by and large become radically acculturated to "a triumphant individualism centered upon a new definition of freedom" that enshrines "the autonomous self" and fosters two "mirror evils": on the one hand, a "moralistic liberalism" that involves spreading a gospel of blindly self-referential "optimism about human nature and destiny"; and, on the other, a necessarily

isolating “individualistic pietism.”⁹⁰ These are exacerbated by a widespread privatization of religion that in effect renders any Christian church unviable as a potential rival or alternative to the state. One cause of such privatization is that the United States—unlike all other North Atlantic nations—has no tradition of an established church (and it is indeed difficult to contend that the hundreds of scattered denominations in the nation comprise one “church” in any meaningful sense of the word: Huntington is altogether right about the legacy of dissenting Protestantism in some regards).⁹¹ Furthermore, insofar as the church proclaims itself to be a body that transcends national boundaries, the state—in order to become a cohesive and undivided body itself—has had a vested interest in encouraging individuals to redefine “religion as a purely internal matter.” This necessarily means denying the relevance of religion to the bodies of individual human beings, rendering it “an affair of the soul” alone, “not the body.”⁹²

Such emphasis on the soul, on interiority, makes religion irrelevant both to political concerns (by making religion merely local to the individual) and to material concerns more generally (by making religion merely a function of individual subjectivity). It negates any sense that the sacrament of baptism in which all Christian bodies participate marks their real “ecclesial solidarity” as joint “members” of the Body of Christ, “of a community broader than the largest nation-state . . . and more capable of exemplifying the notion ‘E Pluribus Unum’ than any empire, past, present, or future.”⁹³ The interiorization of religion also renders ineffectual any church’s critique of an “ethical individualism unwilling to recognize any authority beyond the self.” While undermining of authority might seem to run counter to the interests of the state, it can in fact serve any state that is committed to a capitalist economy and sees itself as threatened by allegiances and ties beyond the nation. Ethical individualism is inevitably complicit with both “an economic individualism pliant before the marketplace” and a “romantic view of individual autonomy, often commingled in the United States with anti-Catholicism,” that lessens any sense of responsibility for or “solidarity with” others—especially with the “most vulnerable” and abject “members” of the social body, those who might appear as “strangers in our midst.”⁹⁴

Hauerwas and Wood suggest that the general failure of churches in the United States to imagine and be “church,” the Body of Christ, is one reason that most eminent U.S. writers—from Ralph Waldo Emerson and

Henry David Thoreau to Emily Dickinson and Mark Twain—have proven to be, “at best,” “heterodox” Christians.⁹⁵ This failure may also help to account for the fact that the U.S. fictions considered in this study are generally not “Christ-centered” but instead “Christ-haunted.”⁹⁶ With this in mind, I want to close by considering a contemporary writer who—though he would likely not quarrel with being identified as heterodox himself—consistently expresses his own desire to belong to “church.” Richard Rodriguez is a Mexican American essayist and journalist from Cather’s beloved West who would agree with much in the critique of U.S. Christianity presented by Hauerwas and Wood. As a portion of chapter 5 here suggests, he is also a kind of creative border theorist, one who has broadly influenced my thinking about borders in the Americas. His *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* openly regrets the excessive individualism and spiritual poverty of his contemporary United States and expresses a corresponding hunger for communion with his parents’ historically Catholic Latin America. As Rodriguez imagines it, that other “America” is less obsessed with racial borders than the United States and—like the immigrant Irish nuns who taught him in California—knows that the “story of man was the story of sin, which could not be overcome by any such thing as a Declaration of Independence.”⁹⁷ He is distinct from many other U.S. writers both in his insistent profession of faith and in his forthright assertion that his dual identities as a Christian, on the one hand, and as a creature of the United States, on the other, are often in conflict with one another—“are not equal partners.” He experiences these two identities as “adversaries in many ways”: they place him “always at odds” with himself on issues ranging from immigration and military actions to abortion and homosexuality. Yet Rodriguez feels that “the Christian church” in the United States has unfortunately “forgotten” the inevitability of such conflict, as the most vocal U.S. Christians too often assert that their religious identity and their national identity are properly one and the same.⁹⁸ In explicitly stressing both the vitality and the propriety of this ongoing tension between U.S. identity and Christian identity, the imaginative essayist Rodriguez radically differs from the self-professed “patriot” Huntington, as he made clear in an appalled review of *Who Are We?*⁹⁹

Rodriguez is also perhaps something of an anomaly in the nation’s literary tradition. Nonetheless, the writers I consider in this study would

all join him in recognizing the power of an image that has captured wide attention in our age of supposed globalization, an image that will necessarily endure: the first pontiff from the Americas—himself a child of immigrants to Argentina—visiting an island in the Mediterranean to pray for and alongside immigrants from Africa. Francis did so at the start of Ramadan, “saluting the beginning of the Muslim season of fasting. And there he stood,” this native of the Americas, “shaking the hands of Muslim migrants, welcoming them to Europe!” So writes Rodriguez, who stresses that the pope’s actions at Lampedusa furthered the 1952 teaching of Pius XII that migration is a human right: “No American president at that time or since has ever uttered such a thought.”¹⁰⁰ Francis has in fact powerfully accentuated older Catholic teachings in this and other regards. In his actions—washing the feet of criminals, embracing bodies disfigured by disease—and in his words alike, this American pope has emphasized Christ’s command to the Church to cross borders, “to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery.” He has preached that the Church must make manifest “the maternal womb of mercy” in “a world of ‘wounded’ persons,” traveling toward such abject human beings even if in the process the Church’s “shoes get soiled by the mud of the streets.”¹⁰¹ Finally, he has emphasized that the entire globe is home to one “human family” that shares “a common destiny.”¹⁰² The Catholic Church understands itself in part as a sacrament—both a sign and an instrument—of that family’s unity. To be sure, not all of the writers considered here are as hopeful regarding the destiny of the human family as the Church proclaims itself to be. All, however, contribute to an ongoing literary tradition in which Catholicism is figured as representative of that destiny, a destiny that originated and will necessarily culminate well beyond the borders of any nation-state.

CRÈVECŒUR'S MASK OF THE MODERN

Roman Ruins and America's "New Man"

The most canonical of colonial Anglo-American texts is William Bradford's history *Of Plymouth Plantation*, written in the mid-seventeenth century. Together with other New England Calvinists, Bradford—the first governor of the Plymouth colony—inaugurated a new Anglophone literary tradition marked by pronounced fears of old Catholic Europe and anxieties regarding the American landscape alike. *Of Plymouth Plantation* opens with his Pilgrims fleeing an England in which the mission of the Reformation had not been fully accomplished, as the established Anglican Church still obscured the “light of the Gospel” under the lingering shadow of Catholicism, “the gross darkness of popery.” Bradford and his fellows hoped to build in America a pure Christian community that would necessarily have sharply delineated borders: Puritan Massachusetts ultimately excluded other dissenting Protestants along with the “savage barbarians” who inhabited the “hideous and desolate wilderness” surrounding it.¹ The nearest Roman Catholics also dwelled in that wilderness—to the north in sparsely settled Quebec, more proximately among native tribes converted by French Jesuit missionaries. To colonial New Englanders, then, Catholicism itself was at once unimaginably beyond the pale and hauntingly close at hand, a

threatening presence that they saw as incorporating pagan idolatry and all the more sinister because nominally within the borders of Christendom.² Their fears of a Europe dominated by Catholicism, of an inherently “savage” American landscape, and of an active Satan bent on undermining their potential Puritan utopia would long resonate in the Gothic literary imagination. At the same time, their sense of their community as chosen to rise above the common flaws of humanity—most memorably articulated in John Winthrop’s vision of his Massachusetts Bay community forming an exceptional “city on a hill”—has continued to resonate for centuries in a United States that the Puritans could never have anticipated.

For good or ill, these seventeenth-century New Englanders in many ways set the stage for all the authors who followed them in the U.S. Gothic tradition. Yet the Puritans themselves were not writers of fiction. Their narratives accordingly lack the complexity of the eighteenth-century text with which I begin: J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*. Written in the same decade as the Declaration of Independence, Crèvecoeur’s multilayered book was long misunderstood as simply reflecting the nation’s Enlightenment roots, or perhaps the beginnings of an optimistic American Romanticism. Early interpreters did insightfully recognize its articulation of perhaps the “earliest and most influential” example of a “new American character” as it describes settlers who, like Benjamin Franklin, often perform a successful “masquerade” that exemplifies their capacity for “metamorphosis, adaptability, and indomitable self-mastery,” for canny transformation from rags to riches in the British America that was becoming the United States.³ For much of its history, then, *Letters* was read neither as Gothic, nor as fiction, nor as particularly concerned with Christianity. Yet scholars have come to recognize the complexity if not outright deceptiveness of the text in part by attending to the fact that Crèvecoeur was not a native of British America, let alone of the United States; he was a French petty aristocrat who came to North America in the 1750s via Quebec and whose sympathies during the American Revolution were with the Loyalists. Writing *Letters* in the persona of a simple Anglo-American farmer, the Jesuit-educated author—who in fact maintained a complicated but generally unremarked relationship to Catholicism—wore a mask himself.⁴

The first readers of *Letters from an American Farmer* were entirely unaware of such complexity. Written in the 1770s and first published in Lon-

don in 1782, *Letters* was among the earliest books to represent the fledgling United States to the larger world. Crèvecoeur's text took the form of a series of letters from a putatively representative Anglo-American colonist, one "Farmer James," to a worldly correspondent in England. Soon translated into Dutch, German, and French, *Letters* was read and admired by audiences on both sides of the North Atlantic. George Washington deemed the book "founded on fact"—if "rather too flattering" to be entirely true.⁵ Washington's reaction was typical in its apparent focus on the book's early sections, particularly Letter III, which claimed that "the most perfect society now existing in the world" was to be found in British North America.⁶ The "American" coming into being there was presented as "a new man"—a "mixture" of the various peoples of northern Europe—and uniquely able to form "new ideas" because his milieu was at once closer to nature and more thoroughly modern than was Europe. Here humanity could escape the mistakes of the past and live the ideal being articulated simultaneously in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. For in British America as nowhere else, James asserts, the "rewards" of each man's "industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest; can it want a stronger allurements?" (70).

In such passages Crèvecoeur offers a fundamentally positive image of Anglo-American culture akin to that crafted by many of his Revolutionary-era contemporaries. In form and content alike, however, his text is finally more complicated than Franklin's *Autobiography* or Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. For Farmer James is a fictional character. Accordingly, *Letters from an American Farmer*, though originally published as the "genuine production" of the simple farmer whose name the text bore—one J. Hector St. John—ultimately demonstrates that Crèvecoeur was "an embryonic novelist" (35).⁷ His epistolary narrator James undergoes a kind of development that becomes most evident in the final letter, in which he is deeply disturbed by the beginnings of the Revolutionary War. Here the Revolution seems not the rational act outlined by Jefferson in the Declaration—an act proceeding with the cool inevitability of a syllogism—but instead an inexplicable eruption of violence threatening to displace James and his family. Even before this moment, however, James describes aspects of the thirteen colonies that call his initially exuberant optimism about British America into question. Most clearly in his horrific description of southern

slavery, more subtly elsewhere, James's America is gradually revealed to be a place that has not altogether avoided evils of the sort he initially wishes to associate with Europe. Instead, it nightmarishly mirrors certain of those evils—and threatens to breed others all its own. Hence *Letters* has gradually come to be identified as a foundational text in the U.S. Gothic literary tradition, a text that initially stresses the emerging nation's superiority but by its conclusion becomes in many respects a horror novel.⁸

Questions of religious identity in *Letters from an American Farmer*, however, have received little sustained attention.⁹ I will demonstrate how the early portions of the text establish anxieties regarding an essentially foreign Catholicism—yet also, and more profoundly, regarding a modern “religious indifference”—as central to Crèvecoeur's ultimately Gothic representation of the border between self and other, the border erected in British America by the willfully autonomous individual. Such borders are established with an initial confidence in Letter I, where James's identity as narrator is established in direct relation to a Protestant minister whose own voice is best understood as akin to other prominent voices in his Revolutionary milieu—particularly those of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine. In the much-anthologized Letter III, James's voice begins by mimicking this minister as he narrates an essentially Anglo-Protestant “American” identity. By the end of the letter, however, James has begun to shift from celebrating the autonomous individual, the natural world, and the interiorization of religious faith to articulating latent anxieties regarding all of these. As James's voice becomes more complicated at this point, I will pause in my reading of *Letters* to elaborate on Crèvecoeur's own identity and proclivity for Gothic narrative—stressing his French Catholic upbringing, his necessarily cosmopolitan perspective on “America,” his distant engagement with the European Enlightenment, and his ultimate capacity to see Catholicism as compatible with if not necessarily essential to a kind of transnational humanism.

Such biographical contexts will prove vital in returning to the text of *Letters*, specifically the well-known Letter IX on slavery, which is profoundly concerned with not only racial and regional borders but also individual, hemispheric, and religious borders in the Americas. This letter features subtle reflection on the fading authority of Christian churches in the British colonies and turns on a strikingly violent Eucharistic image that

sparks incipiently Manichean meditations on the part of James. Read properly, these reveal a critique of Enlightenment notions of disembodied universal subjectivity—of a rational self willfully detached from any other—at the heart of *Letters from an American Farmer*. That critique is best understood in relation to Crèvecoeur's broader oeuvre and identity during and immediately following the American Revolution. Of particular importance in this regard are his closet drama *Landscapes*, which satirizes an emergent American exceptionalism that is directly tied to dissenting Protestantism among Patriots during the Revolution; his role and legacy in helping to establish New York City's first Catholic church in 1785; and his fateful relationship with the family of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

MEETING THE AMERICAN FARMER: CRÈVECCEUR'S NARRATOR AND HIS MILIEU

Crèvecoeur's persona James begins *Letters from an American Farmer* by associating his own budding literacy with his Protestant identity—though, as we shall see, this identity is finally better understood in relation to Franklin and Paine than to John Calvin or Jonathan Edwards. A Pennsylvania-born farmer, James is self-professedly unsophisticated, having inherited from his father only a few “miscellaneous” books of Elizabethan history and “Scotch divinity” (40). The text's premise is that a highly educated Englishman has written him to request that they begin an extended correspondence about America. James reports in his very first letter that he is hesitant to do so until he receives encouragement from his local minister, who is both a neighbor and a farmer himself. The minister professes a general trust in the ability of the common man to work competently with texts—a trust founded on assumptions that here clearly owe as much to John Locke as to Martin Luther. Writing is not necessarily complex, the minister maintains: a letter is “only conversation put down in black and white” (44). He fully believes that James is capable of a good plain style and even has certain advantages in this regard: your “mind,” he tells James, “is what we called at Yale college a *tabula rasa*, where spontaneous and strong impressions are delineated with facility” (46).

Furthermore, James has particularly worthwhile information to communicate to his English correspondent, who—the minister imagines—has

probably already wasted too much time studying Europe in general and one country in particular: Italy. In a lengthy monologue, dutifully reported by James, the minister places pagan-*cum*-Catholic Rome at the center of the tragedy that human history has been up until the eighteenth century. America, he believes, is more worthy of study precisely because it has been exempt from that history. Anything viewed in Rome “must have a reference to ancient generations” and is “clouded with the mist of ages”:

Here, on the contrary, everything is modern, peaceful, and benign. Here we have had no war to desolate our fields; our religion does not oppress the cultivators; we are strangers to those feudal institutions which have enslaved so many. Here Nature opens her broad lap to receive the perpetual accession of newcomers and to supply them with food. I am sure I cannot be called a partial American when I say, that the spectacle afforded by these pleasing scenes must be more entertaining, and more philosophical than that which arises from beholding the musty ruins of Rome. Here everything would inspire the reflecting traveller with the most philanthropic ideas; his imagination, instead of submitting to the painful and useless retrospect of revolutions, desolations, and plagues, would, on the contrary, wisely spring forward to the anticipated fields of future cultivation and improvement, to the future extent of those generations which are to replenish and embellish this boundless continent. There the half-ruined amphitheatres, and the putrid fevers of the Campania, must fill the mind with the most melancholy reflections, whilst he is seeking for the origin, and the intention of those structures with which he is surrounded, and for the cause of so great a decay. Here he might contemplate the very beginnings and out-lines of human society, which can be traced nowhere now but in this part of the world. . . . For my part I had rather admire the ample barn of one of our opulent farmers, who himself felled the first tree in his plantation, and was the first founder of his settlement, than study the dimensions of the temple of Ceres. I had rather record the progressive steps of this industrious farmer, throughout all the stages of his labours and other operations, than examine how modern Italian convents can be supported without doing anything but singing and praying. (42–43)

The minister in fact believes “misguided religion, tyranny, and absurd laws, everywhere depress and afflict mankind,” but he chooses Italy as the worst possible example—even as he asserts that in his own newly settled land “we have in some measure regained the ancient dignity of our species.” He draws a clear border between a Mediterranean Europe that is ancient, Catholic, and corrupt and an America that is at once modern and nearly Edenic. While his negative view of Rome resembles that of earlier Puritans in certain broad respects, it is not grounded in any Protestant theology: the minister critiques Italian convents not because they are unbiblical but because they are not economically self-reliant. Despite living in the modern era, the convent’s religious cling to a medieval rule, their minds presumably cluttered with dogma altogether foreign to James’s exemplary Lockean psyche. Devoting their lives only to “singing and praying,” they seem decadent aesthetes and otherworldly ascetics all at once. Surely, the minister believes, the world has more to learn from an industrious American man—he is a farmer himself six days of the week—than from any Roman convent.

In common English usage of the day, a “convent” might be the home of either male or female religious, so the minister’s views regarding gender are not entirely clear. Nonetheless, he inhabits a Revolutionary milieu in which “submissiveness to royal authority and commitment to the larger community were coming to be seen as feminine, while rugged individualism was increasingly becoming the model for American masculinity.”¹⁰ Such individualism was in many respects at the heart of Franklin’s *Autobiography*, wherein the authority in question is ultimately not the Crown but the church—and Christian tradition generally. Franklin resembles the minister of *Letters* in that he views historical Protestantism not as a means of purifying Christianity but rather as a stage on the way and a means to becoming more fully modern, which is to say self-sufficient. In his *Autobiography*, he initially professes pride in the fact that he is descended from dissenting English Protestants who, at risk of punishment by Anglican authorities, secretly endeavored to read the Bible on their own.¹¹ Yet this is only by way of introducing his own deliberate departure from any Christian communion as he ultimately seeks to develop a practical, do-it-yourself morality that yields quite tangible rewards, like those gained by the industrious and therefore “opulent” American farmer in the minister’s account.

In certain respects, James's minister is even more closely akin to Revolutionary Patriot Thomas Paine. Paine ultimately confessed in *The Age of Reason* that he subscribed to the tenets of no church other than the church of his "own mind," yet nonetheless highlighted the faith of Rome as the epitome of the irrational religious traditionalism that he hoped humanity would soon outgrow.¹² Much as James's minister implicitly links the parasitic Catholic convent with the uselessly decorative temple of the goddess Ceres, Paine deplores the legacy of a Mediterranean world where "the statue of Mary succeeded the statue of Diana in Ephesus. The deification of heroes changed into the canonization of saints. The Mythologists had gods for everything; the Christian Mythologists had saints for everything. The church became as crowded with one, as the pantheon had been with the other; and Rome was the place of both." So far, Luther or Calvin might have said the same. But Paine immediately goes further in denouncing all Christian churches as practicing "little else than the idolatry of the ancient Mythologists, accommodated to the purposes of power and revenue."¹³ As with James's minister, Paine's overriding concern is with politics and economics, not theology—or at least not with theology as it has traditionally been understood. Paine maintains that "the true theology" is that discipline "which is now called natural philosophy, embracing the whole circle of science, of which astronomy occupies the chief place": this is the true "study of the works of God, and of the power and wisdom of God in his works."¹⁴

Paine's belief in this regard is essential to yet another crucial point on which he bears a subtle resemblance to James's minister—this time as budding American Patriot. In *Common Sense*, Paine argues:

Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America is a strong and natural proof that the authority of the one over the other, was never the design of Heaven. The time likewise at which the Continent was discovered, adds weight to the argument, and the manner in which it was peopled, increases the force of it. The Reformation was preceded by the discovery of America: As if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years, when home should afford neither friendship nor safety.¹⁵

Paine is a Deist, not an atheist, and speaking here to a colonial American audience that he knows to be overwhelmingly Protestant, his rhetoric de-

pend on reference to one God. But that God is in fact the God of nature. Paine argues not from biblical revelation but from empirical observation that the God who designed nature clearly placed America at a safe remove from Europe to ensure its independence. This same God designed history so that an ostensibly unpeopled America would be discovered by Europeans precisely when many of them most needed to flee rising political and religious tyranny—a tyranny newly manifested in 1776 by a British Crown that is strikingly characterized as both “jesuitical” and “papistical.”¹⁶

James’s minister does not speak to these issues as directly, but he like Paine sees nature and the historical “design of Heaven” as demarcating the border between America and Europe (as represented by Catholic Italy). The two continents appear in his previously cited monologue as prelapsarian and postlapsarian, respectively. In placid America, “Nature opens her broad lap” to welcome and feed oppressed strangers, and the landscape itself inspires humans with “the most philanthropic ideas.” Italy, by contrast, is not only devastated by injustices and violence attributable to human moral agency but also characterized by “plagues” and “putrid fevers” that cannot even be observed without causing “melancholy.” While James’s minister is nominally Protestant, then, in his remarks he favors a manly self-reliant Deism of the sort exemplified by Franklin and Paine and held to be uniquely available in America—that land chosen not by the God of Israel as revealed in Scripture but by the “design of Heaven” as revealed in nature.

The minister appears only in the first of James’s twelve letters, yet he remains a crucial reference point throughout *Letters from an American Farmer* because James himself initially adheres to the minister’s “model of America’s difference” from Europe.¹⁷ James, as we shall see, also attempts to follow the minister—and mirrors Franklin and Paine—in a nascent U.S. habit of seeing “Protestantism’s emancipation from Catholicism” as providing the “blueprint” for “secularism’s emancipation from ‘religion’ itself.”¹⁸ He does so in an initially approbatory account of the privatization of religion by way of interiorization, which is to say the disembodiment of Christian practice. James articulates a pattern of settler “assimilation” to British America in the context of apparent religious “pluralism” via “a redefinition of religious life that derived from the Enlightenment and, before that, from the Protestant Reformation. The redefinition began with the Protestant claim to locate religion in the consciousness and the conscience of the

individual” and “would result in a considerable narrowing of the realm of religion in public life.”¹⁹

James’s most extensive general statements regarding religion come in Letter III. Here he posits that religious differences among American colonists are both widespread and so rapidly interiorized that they quickly and properly fade into religious indifference. James makes this case by proceeding through a litany of different types of Christian farmers. He begins with a Catholic, despite the fact that there are so very few of them in the British colonies. Implicitly, he does so because this Christian’s faith is most dependent on externals, on a visible Church and its sacraments: “as he has been taught,” the Catholic settler “believes in transubstantiation” and accordingly in the centrality of the Eucharist to Christian life (74). But in James’s America, such seemingly radical belief makes no external difference in the believer’s life. Belief remains so completely internalized here that the Catholic is finally no different from his neighbor, “a good, honest, plodding Lutheran, who addresses himself to the same God, the God of all, agreeably to the modes he has been educated in, and believes in consubstantiation; by so doing, he scandalizes nobody; he also works in his fields, embellishes the earth, clears swamps, etc. What has the world to do with his Lutheran principles?” (74). Such laudable separation of faith from “the world” is also happily characteristic of a “seceder, the most enthusiastic of all sectaries.” What matters in America is simply that this man, like the first two, is “a good farmer, a sober, peaceable, good citizen”: “how does it concern the welfare of the country, or the provinces at large, what this man’s religious sentiments are, or really whether he has any at all?” Completing a gradual reversal of his initial emphasis on private belief, James ends this catalogue by straightforwardly asserting that this last farmer’s industrious good citizenship admirably marks his external and “visible character; the invisible one is only guessed at, and is nobody’s business” (74–75). Because all Americans tend to share this habit of assessment, James says, they demonstrate a growing tendency toward “imperfect” religious education of the young. This is why “religious indifference” has emerged as “one of the strongest characteristics of the Americans,” a people whose real devotion is to industry (and whose gradual abandonment of Christianity may soon create a “vacuum fit to receive other systems” of religious belief). Such indifference is in fact a positive good because “what the [European]

world commonly calls religion" feeds on "persecution, religious pride, and the love of contradiction," all of which are in fact disruptive to healthy societies (76).

James's approving account of the "religious indifference" of Americans here is consistent with the general optimism of Letter III. Crucially, however, this account is placed between two meditative descriptions of the western frontier—descriptions that clearly call into question the value of religious indifference. The first comes immediately after James, having ended the unqualified paean to Britain's American colonies that opens the letter, suddenly strikes a more complicated note: he lists the defining "characteristics" of Americans as "industry, good living, selfishness, litigiousness, country politics, the pride of freemen, religious indifference" (72). He elaborates on the more obviously negative of these terms as he for the first time considers the frontier, home to the most "modern" (i.e., recent) settlements, where "religion seems to have still less influence" than elsewhere:

When discord, want of unity and friendship, when either drunkenness or idleness prevail in such remote districts, contention, inactivity, and wretchedness must ensue. There are not the same remedies to these evils as in a long established community. The few magistrates they have are in general little better than the rest; they are often in a perfect state of war; that of man against man, sometimes decided by blows, sometimes by means of the law; that of man against every wild inhabitant of these venerable woods, of which they are come to dispossess them. There men appear to be no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank, living on the flesh of wild animals when they can catch them, and when they are not able, they subsist on grain. He who would wish to see America in its proper light, and have a true idea of its feeble beginnings and barbarous rudiments must visit our extended line of frontiers, where the last settlers dwell and where he may see the first labours of settlement, the mode of clearing the earth, in all their different appearances, where men are wholly left dependent on their native tempers, and on the spur of uncertain industry, which often fails when not sanctified by the efficacy of a few moral rules. There, remote from the power of example and check of shame, many families exhibit the most hideous parts of our society. (72)

James here for the first time begins to darken the bright picture of America initially painted by his minister. Up until now, both had implicitly presented the cultivated farmlands of Pennsylvania and the middle colonies generally as synecdoche for all America. But as he considers the frontier for the first time, James posits that nature in America can wear a countenance even grimmer than that which the minister presented it as wearing in disease-ridden Europe. Here, the natural world implicitly involves a “state of war” between “carnivorous animals.” More horrifically, the settlers who live in these most “modern” settlements along the frontier, stripped of all ties to tradition, begin to mirror such animals as they make war against each other. Simultaneously, in “dispossessing” animals of the woods, such humans also make war against nature itself.

Paradoxically, this warfare against nature—this radical transformation of the frontier that is at the heart of the westward expansion of British America—occurs in pursuit of the very same self-interest that James had earlier praised as “the basis of nature.” Such self-interest now suddenly appears not as the proper basis for industry but as a selfishness that fosters violence, a selfishness fostered by “unlimited freedom.” This last is made clear in James’s second meditation on the frontier. Having turned away from the region once to approve, in the passages considered earlier, the steady growth of “religious indifference” among the more settled Christian farmers, James rapidly and inexplicably turns his attention to the frontier a second time. He poses himself the question: what sort of people inhabit it? His answer:

Europeans who have not that sufficient share of knowledge they ought to have, in order to prosper; people who have suddenly passed from oppression, dread of government, and fear of laws, into the unlimited freedom of the woods. . . . Eating of wild meat, what ever you may think, tends to alter their temper, though all the proof I can adduce is that I have seen it, and having no place of worship to resort to, what little society this might afford is denied them. The Sunday meetings, exclusive of religious benefits, were the only social bonds that might have inspired them with some degree of emulation in neatness. . . . The Moravians and the Quakers are the only instances in exception to what I have advanced. The first never settle singly; it is a colony of the society which emigrates; they carry with them their forms, worship, rules, and decency. (77)

James here directly highlights the negative effects of “religious indifference” and stresses that Christianity is valuable—not because it is true, but because it is useful. It predisposes its practitioners to form social bonds and develop virtues such as “neatness” that seem to yield greater prosperity for the entire community. More surprising, perhaps, is James’s suggestion that specific practices—“forms, worship, rules”—may be essential to even this aspect of Christianity, as in the case of the Moravians. His admiration of the Quakers, as we shall see, is more complicated. So too is his obsession with diet and the act of eating itself. That obsession is partly explicable as a function of James’s budding naturalism, his tendency to view humans merely as organisms that respond to their environments. But this explanation is finally insufficient to account for the whole of the text here. The eating of “wild meat” and corresponding degeneration of human “temper” is connected grammatically to the absence of a proper “place of worship” that would afford a basis for “society”—a place, perhaps, to eat together and thereby become part of a common body. In Christian tradition, certainly in Catholic tradition, the food that unites many believers into one body would be the body of Christ, the Eucharist.

This possibility would likely not occur to James. It would, however, to his creator. Understanding Crèvecoeur himself is necessary to better understand the Gothic aspects of *Letters from an American Farmer*, incipiently developed in James’s horrific images of the frontier, in relation to Catholicism. Though Crèvecoeur spent nearly a decade living as an American farmer himself, he finally could not be more different from James. The disjunction between their identities is at the root of the crisis of authority—that hallmark of the early Gothic—that first surfaces in James’s third letter as he unwittingly begins to question the simplistically positive model of British America favored by his minister.

BEHIND CRÈVECŒUR’S MASK: JESUITS, BORDER CROSSINGS, AND “GOTHIC PARCHMENTS”

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur was born Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur in Caen, Normandy, in 1735.²⁰ Scion of a Catholic family in the local petty nobility, he was a boarding student at the Jesuit Collège Royal de Bourbon (later the Collège du Mont). The curriculum heavily emphasized language and literature—grammar, rhetoric, poetry, oratory,

Latin, and possibly English—as well as mathematics and certain applied sciences. Given tendencies in Jesuit thought at the time, it is possible that the faculty were “receptive to new developments” in the sciences and “optimistic about the moral progress of human history”—though in France this was countered by a “pro-Augustinian, often pro-Jansenist Catholic Enlightenment” that was more “pessimistic about the depravity of human nature and reason.”²¹ Crèvecoeur later wrote that he hated the severity of the school and the dreariness of its boarding conditions, but he excelled in the classroom. At around age twenty, apparently unhappy with his father, he left home to live with distant relatives in England. Within a few years he traveled to Quebec, where some of his former Jesuit masters had served, and joined the French Colonial Army. He fought against the British in the Seven Years’ War until professional disgrace, budding “anglophilia,” or some combination of the two apparently caused him to resign his commission and cross the border into New York in 1759.²² He spent much of the following decade traveling in the British colonies as a surveyor, trapper, and trader, finally transforming himself into a naturalized New York citizen with a new name, “J. Hector St. John.” Settling down to farm in Orange County—proudly named for King William, whose Glorious Revolution had ensured that England was free from Catholicism for good—he soon married a local Anglo-Protestant woman and fathered three children. He may have owned a few slaves and doubtless had African servants: a watercolor he painted of his own *Plantation of Pine-Hill* is centered on a black man bending over a plow as Crèvecoeur and his wife look on from beneath a shade tree.²³ Though he presumably enjoyed his newly settled agrarian life, he was not averse to traveling the short distance to New York City for more cosmopolitan company. He read the French philosophes and began to pen literary sketches of America. His decision to publish these owed much to the encouragement of his close friend William Seton, an English-born Episcopalian merchant—whose future daughter-in-law Elizabeth would become the first U.S.-born Roman Catholic saint.²⁴

The outbreak of the Revolutionary War caused Crèvecoeur considerable personal anxiety. He sought to journey to France to reestablish his patrimony, taking his eldest son and the recently completed manuscript of *Letters from an American Farmer* with him. En route he was imprisoned by the British as a possible rebel spy—though his actual sympathies were

Loyalist—until Seton arranged his release. Crèvecoeur stopped in London and there secured a publisher for *Letters* in 1781 before arriving in France later the same year. He stayed until the American Revolution was over. Then, making the most of his father's connections, he befriended Benjamin Franklin in Paris and secured a position as French consul to the newly independent states of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. In this capacity Crèvecoeur returned to America in 1783 only to find that his wife had been killed by Native Americans allied with the British. Reuniting with his children, he spent most of the following seven years as consul in the United States before returning to France in 1790. On the outbreak of the French Revolution, he chose to live in obscurity in Normandy for most of the following decade.²⁵ He never returned to America and died outside Paris in 1813.

No undisputed biography of Crèvecoeur yet exists; he remains to some extent a mysterious figure. But the commonly recognized facts above firmly support the conclusion that he “was too much of a divided man ever to become a complete American.”²⁶ His life, unlike that of James, was one spent constantly crossing borders. But what was his religious identity, and what role did it play in prefiguring or establishing a Gothic literary tradition in the United States? An account of his youth in Normandy that he wrote late in life helps to answer both questions. Crèvecoeur was reared on his father's ancient family estate and as a boy attended an eleventh-century Romanesque church on a neighboring hilltop; Caen itself featured a massive Benedictine abbey that served as the burial site of William the Conqueror, whose tomb had been defaced by Calvinist iconoclasts in the sixteenth century.²⁷ None of this history was lost on the young Crèvecoeur:

From my earliest youth I had a passion for pondering every trace of antiquity which I came across—worm-eaten furniture, tapestries, old family portraits, and the Gothic parchments of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that I tried to decipher held an indefinable charm for me. When I was older, I loved to stroll in the solitude of graveyards, to examine the tombstones, and to make out the moss-grown epitaphs. . . . I knew most of the churches in our district, the time of their foundation, the most interesting things they contained by way of paintings or sculptures.²⁸

This passage clearly distinguishes the author Crèvecoeur from Farmer James (and James's minister). While he seems indeed to have wished at certain points in his life to transform himself into a new man in America, Crèvecoeur—fascinated by “antiquity” and deeply engaged from youth with the history of his native Europe—could never become a *tabula rasa*. Furthermore, his habitual attention to aesthetic detail and professed fondness for the “charm” of potentially undecipherable ancient documents uncannily support the characterization of him as “embryonic” Gothic novelist. Critics long failed to recognize that Crèvecoeur's use of James as his own doppelganger in *Letters* is in many ways as outrageous as Horace Walpole's outright hoax in *The Castle of Otranto*. It seems less so only because Crèvecoeur actually lived out the fiction of being someone other than himself—of being J. Hector St. John of Orange County, New York. That Crèvecoeur had a proclivity for encrypting authority as marked as Walpole's was perhaps even more clearly reflected in his second book about America, published in France in 1801 as *Voyage dans la haute Pensylvanie et dans New York*, which wildly purported to be a translation of a damaged English manuscript found in a shipwreck off Copenhagen.²⁹

Crèvecoeur's family history and education were inescapably intertwined with Catholicism. But what were his own mature religious beliefs? Critics and biographers have devoted little attention to this question, casually labeling him a “Deist à la Rousseau, if not à la Voltaire,” who simply outgrew the faith of his parents and Jesuit teachers in keeping with the spirit of his age. There is no evidence that he was a regular Catholic communicant after he left Quebec. His 1769 marriage and the eventual baptism of his children were conducted by a Huguenot minister he had befriended in New York.³⁰ Even if Crèvecoeur had desired the Catholic sacraments, however, they would have been hard to come by in New York: prior to the Revolution, the Catholic Church was rigorously restricted there, even more so than in most British colonies.³¹ Significantly, Crèvecoeur would play a vital role in remedying this in 1785 as he became one of four founding “trustees of the Catholic Church in the City of New York.” He helped to set in motion the building of the city's very first Catholic church, St. Peter's, where his daughter would be married in 1790 with William Seton and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson in attendance.³²

After his permanent return to France, Crèvecoeur's known relationship to the Catholic Church is perhaps most tellingly marked by his relationship with the Abbé Grégoire, a controversial juror bishop who simultaneously supported the French Revolution and proclaimed himself a faithful Catholic. The two men shared an interest in the abolition of slavery. Crèvecoeur's abolitionist tendencies dated at least from his reading of a very different "abbé," Guillaume Thomas François Raynal, an openly apostate priest whose writings on the Americas served as a partial model for *Letters*. Grégoire was in some ways as much a child of the Enlightenment as Raynal, with the essential difference that he ultimately asserted—however problematically—that the Catholic Church was essential to the achievement of a proper human "universalism."³³ His essentially antiracist beliefs drove him to become "perhaps the most important leader of the nascent abolition movement in France in the 1790s" and to send "a copy of one of his attacks on slavery" to U.S. bishop John Carroll.³⁴ Crèvecoeur met Grégoire on several occasions after 1790 and wrote fondly of the priest's warmth and kindness toward him.³⁵

Beyond this, there is little on record regarding Crèvecoeur's engagement with Catholicism in the final two decades of his life. As I will clarify in my conclusion, his drama *Landscapes*—written during the Revolution—reveals his mounting sense of the dangers of a U.S. nationalism bound to dissenting Protestantism, and the early years of the Catholic parish he helped to found in New York City provide a vital window onto the relationship of Catholicism, the Americas, and U.S. borders. But the mature interest in abolition that he shared with Abbé Grégoire provides a key to returning to *Letters from an American Farmer* itself, specifically to that portion of the text most commonly identified as Gothic.

CHRISTIANITY, SLAVERY, AND THE AMERICAS IN *LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER*

Aside from Letter III, the most frequently discussed and anthologized portion of the text by far is Letter IX, on slavery. The intervening letters focus primarily not on British America at large but on the Quakers of Nantucket Island in particular. In this regard Crèvecoeur participated in a larger

pattern as he depicted James's hopes for America: "In crucial ways for European thinkers, and especially for French artists, intellectuals, and politicians of the late eighteenth-century Revolutionary period, Quakers had emerged as representations of a uniquely attractive blend of piety and communitarianism."³⁶ James's brief comment in Letter III alone makes clear that this is exactly how he views the Quakers: when the habitual American "religious indifference" that he wishes to see as generally advantageous fosters a dangerously radical self-interest on the frontier, pious Quaker communities are somehow able to resist it. In this section James first articulates an appreciation of the interconnection of religious devotion and community—and a sense of how both might be endangered in America. Praxis-oriented man that he is, he also expresses his specific admiration of Quaker resistance to slavery at several points in *Letters*. As we shall see in turning to James's depiction of the plantation South, he ultimately connects slavery to self-interest of the same sort displayed by most frontier settlers.

James's hopes for the Quakers as representing the best communitarian aspects of Christianity in America have considerably diminished if not collapsed by the end of Letter VIII, however, as the Friends have failed to produce an island utopia on Nantucket.³⁷ The letter that immediately follows is not only utterly dystopian but also marks the most significant geographical shift in the entire text: James's scope, heretofore limited to the mid-Atlantic colonies and Nantucket, suddenly broadens to include not only the southern British colonies but also the Americas at large. His opening sentence in Letter IX describes South Carolina's port city of Charleston as, in North America, "what Lima is in the South; both are capitals of the richest provinces of their respective hemispheres" (166). A general comparison of South Carolina to Spanish America and the Caribbean continues throughout the first part of the letter, implicitly placing South Carolina in a negative light even before slavery is mentioned. Crèvecoeur was well attuned to the Black Legend, a longstanding European narrative that posited particular depravity in Spain's colonization of the Americas partly as a means of making other colonial powers seem justified by comparison.³⁸ The Black Legend had some currency in France but was most pronounced in England—where supporters of Oliver Cromwell, for example, justified seizing Jamaica from Spain in 1655 by drawing on translations of Spanish priest Bartolomé de las Casas's scathing indictment of his own countrymen

for their mistreatment of natives in the Americas more than a century earlier.³⁹ Aspects of the Black Legend clearly informed Crèvecoeur's unpublished essay "Sketch of a Contrast Between the Spanish and the English Colonies," which he wrote in the 1770s and perhaps considered including in *Letters*. This sketch compares settlers of England's simple, industrious, freedom-loving "Protestant Colonies" with priest-ridden South American Catholics—who waste a good deal of time praying to saints and confessing sins but nonetheless remain slaves to sloth and to vice generally. In many respects this sketch simply "paraded a cluster of stereotypes, with religion given pride of place," as it presented "a banal encapsulation of the prejudices and assumptions of eighteenth-century Europe."⁴⁰

Given the complexity of Crèvecoeur's published work, there can be little doubt that this sketch was intentionally written in the voice of a naïve character such as James is initially.⁴¹ Furthermore, the neat dichotomy that it proposes completely collapses when read alongside *Letters from an American Farmer*, where South Carolina gradually comes to appear less as simulacrum of Spanish America than as representative of all the worst aspects of the "Protestant Colonies." Here, James views as horrific almost everything that he initially lauded about British America: self-interest, religious indifference, and even proximity to nature. But he starts with lawyers.

Comparing the wide disparity between rich and poor in Charleston with that which he believes to be typical in Spanish America, James opines that the proximate causes of that disparity are quite different. In British America, it is not Catholic clergy but lawyers who are to blame: "In another century, the law will possess [in the British colonies] what the church now possesses in Peru and Mexico" (168). In Carolina even the richest planters and merchants seem merely "tributary" to lawyers, who "far above priests and bishops, disdain to be satisfied with the poor Mosaical portion of the tenth" (167). The power of lawyers will necessarily continue to increase not only in this colony but throughout all British America, James observes, as "the nature of our laws and the spirit of freedom, which often tends to make us litigious, must necessarily throw the greatest part of the property of the colonies" into their hands.

Here, then, planters are subordinate to lawyers; but "the church" is subordinate to both—insofar as it exists at all. James reports an account of a Carolina minister who attempts to warn planters that it is their Christian

duty not to abuse slaves: “‘Sir,’ said one of his hearers, ‘we pay you a genteel salary to read to us the prayers of the liturgy and to explain to us such parts of the Gospel as the rule of the church directs, but we do not want you to teach us what to do with our blacks.’ The clergyman found it prudent to withhold any further admonition” (172–73). This passage recalls a comment from Letter III, where James describes a Pennsylvania Dutch Calvinist who ultimately “conceives no other idea of a clergyman than that of an hired man: if he does his work well, he will pay him the stipulated sum; if not, he will dismiss him, and do without his sermons, and let his church be shut up for years” (75). Though initially approved as part of James’s account of the growth of “religious indifference” in British America, the same practice appears in a quite different light in relation to slavery. Churches here can in effect have or teach no “rule” that runs counter to the self-interest of whatever individuals happen to employ any given minister; to do so would break the contract between them.

As on the frontier, then, radical “religious indifference” in the plantation South extends such self-interest well beyond any ostensibly limited economic sphere: human beings at their very core seem merely to be advanced “carnivorous animals” who prey on one another’s flesh. This is clear at the very end of Letter IX, which features a graphic scene in which a slave who allegedly killed an overseer is tortured to death both by his human owner and—in a sense—by nature. James unexpectedly encounters the slave while walking on a wooded plantation outside Charleston. The man has been suspended in a cage on a tree, intentionally left bleeding and exposed in a place where birds and insects, having already pecked out his eyes, now “eat his flesh and drink his blood” (178). This scene, the most unforgettably horrific in the book, has been vital to the gradual identification of *Letters* as a Gothic text and to the characterization of Crèvecoeur as “embryonic novelist”: his literary skill is readily apparent as in “the midst of a realistic description,” he introduces “a Christian eucharistic idiom” in order “to heighten the horror” of the scene.⁴² “Half-dead and half-alive, a rotting corpse and a Christ figure, the caged slave embodies the abject,” to be sure—with a peculiar Catholic resonance in this region of British America that has initially been associated with Peru.⁴³ In fact, the scene’s complexities can be fully understood only with reference to Letter III. On the one hand, this encounter in the woods must be connected to James’s

account of the frontier there, of human degeneration into violence in the wild freedom of America. On the other, the scene's allusion to Christ's crucifixion in conjunction with a "eucharistic idiom" recalls the earlier discussion of transubstantiation—a topic of little inherent significance to the nominally Protestant James, but necessarily more freighted to the Jesuit-educated Crèvecoeur.

James is unable to satisfactorily respond to his experience of the wounded body before him. He briefly and sentimentally sympathizes with the slave, wishing that he had a musket with which he could simply euthanize the man. Then he all too quickly reverts to his role as self-satisfied Anglo-American farmer. James walks away from any nascent sense of communion with the suffering slave to share a meal instead with the plantation owner—who, playing the role of scientist and lawyer alike, tells James that punishments of the sort he has just witnessed are mandated by "the laws of self-preservation," laws dictated by nature itself (179). Juxtaposed with Letter III's vision of humans as carnivores, Letter IX's initial linkage of planter luxury and slave suffering, and the immediately preceding description of the slave being consumed alive, James's meal with this planter becomes a figuratively cannibalistic Eucharist.⁴⁴ It is wrenched from any traditional Christian theological context, however, as the planter who presides over it articulates a proto-Darwinian view of existence as violent competition among individuals and races—a view that mandates borders within as well as around his America and that is, furthermore, consistent with James's own initial emphasis on self-interest.

This vision of the state of nature as a state of war is one that James—who quietly owns several slaves himself—has in fact begun to articulate himself in the second half of Letter IX, albeit sadly.⁴⁵ Completely departing from his minister's initial near-Edenic image of America, James approaches the broader conclusion that British America is in no respect exempt from the wretched "history of the earth!"—and, furthermore, that nature itself is to blame, for "man, an animal of prey, seems to have rapine and the love of bloodshed implanted in his heart" (173–74). Such reflection leads James for the first time to straightforwardly theological questions. Having previously assumed the existence of a distant designing God who is essentially good, he now asks whether there must not be some crucial distinction between that God and a lower, malevolent nature.⁴⁶ Left to his own devices,

then, James—our *tabula rasa*—begins postulating something quite like the doctrine of the ancient Manicheans, of whom he would know little. Crèvecoeur, by contrast, gave them intermittent consideration, musing in a separate sketch entitled “The American Belisarius” that those who lose faith in eternal rewards and punishments might necessarily “turn Manichean” and “worship the Daemon of the Times”—that is, worship the merely material or worldly, and thereby turn violent. A narrator of another piece by Crèvecoeur, “The Frontier Woman,” suggests as much: “Methinks no fitter Period could be chosen to propagate the doctrine of the Manicheans than that of civil war,” for “it is then that human Nature appears as if wholly left to the Guidance of some Powerful evil Genius.”⁴⁷ The “civil war” under consideration is the American Revolution.

It is with the outbreak of that Revolution that *Letters* ends, on a note of radical confusion and uncertainty, as a fearful James contemplates fleeing with his family into the wilderness. Here the collapse of the narrator’s initial naïveté is complete. James began his letters by placidly recording his minister’s confident assertion that war was not a concern in America as it had been in the Old World (an assertion that Crèvecoeur, who had fought battles on North American soil as a French soldier, knew to be patently untrue). In the end, the narrator comes to experience at home war and other horrors that he would rather wall off in Rome, horrors that foster a final existential crisis that he—fittingly—must ponder all on his own.

ENLIGHTENMENT, REVOLUTION, AND CHURCH IN AMERICA: CRÈVECŒUR’S COMPLEX LEGACY

Recognizing the gap between Crèvecoeur and his creature James is essential to understanding *Letters from an American Farmer* as a Gothic fiction that challenges notions of borders in the Americas in relation to Catholicism. The author was a Jesuit-educated Frenchman and an inveterate traveler across the breadth of the North Atlantic; his character, a self-educated Anglo-American, a nominal Protestant, and a provincial whose Europe could only be imaginary. That narrator’s experience of crossing internal borders—along the frontier and in a plantation South that he wishes to conflate with Latin America—proves deeply unsettling. Critics have in-

creasingly recognized the gap between author and character, and Crèvecoeur's ultimately critical stance toward British America and liberalism, without recognizing the vital role that religious identity plays in it.⁴⁸ Some have rightly recognized that the text not only reveals James's isolated naïveté but also provides a means of critiquing certain Enlightenment presuppositions. In the character of James, Crèvecoeur offers "a clear diagram of the scientific standpoint increasingly adopted for the articulation of white manhood" in the eighteenth century. Specifically, James's conclusion at the end of Letter IX that "it is the very *cruelty of Nature* that creates slavery" is in fact "enabled" by the "scientific perspective" that he—along with his planter host—claims to have achieved. James's accompanying failure to do any more than briefly sympathize with the particular slave body he encounters here is, like his moments of condescending affection for his wife, a function of the "disembodied, objective, and universalized standpoint offered by Enlightenment science" and put into practice in his milieu by white males who figure themselves as autonomous agents.⁴⁹ The ultimate failure of human community here is in fact a function of the desire for individual autonomy, itself associated with achievement of the detached "scientific" Enlightenment standpoint that—in the social arrangements of the day—was most readily accessible to and encouraged in white males.

How might Catholicism have encouraged Crèvecoeur not only to resist idolizing individual autonomy but also to consider and admire forms of identity other than those favored by the Enlightenment and his contemporary Anglo-American culture alike? A partial answer to this broad question can be found by considering a more specific one: why did Crèvecoeur, on returning to New York as French consul after the American Revolution, play an active role in establishing the very first Catholic church in the new nation's most populous city?

To be precise, Crèvecoeur served as a "lay trustee" who played the lead role in securing the property on which to build St. Peter's Catholic Church in New York City in 1785.⁵⁰ A history of Catholicism in the city notes that the "zeal" he displayed in doing so "on his part is surprising, because according to reliable information he was by no means a fervent Catholic."⁵¹ His motives for helping the Church are debatable. Crèvecoeur perhaps believed "that the reassertion of his Catholicism might help him gain recognition in France of the legitimacy of his children," whose legal status there was indeterminate at the time.⁵² It is also possible that he saw fostering the

Catholic Church in the United States as a duty of his consular office—though his “earnest” appeals to Louis XVI to fund St. Peter’s failed.⁵³ What is certain is that Crèvecoeur’s efforts earned the appreciation of the prominent Catholic laymen who worked in concert with him to found St. Peter’s. These included diplomats from Spain and Portugal who soon secured donations from benefactors located in Cuba and Mexico, as well as their Iberian homelands, in support of the new church.⁵⁴ Some of these co-founders joined Crèvecoeur at St. Peter’s in 1790 as his daughter was married there by an Irish priest shortly before the family returned to France for good.⁵⁵ Among the guests in attendance at the wedding were William Seton and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, who signed the legal certificate of marriage himself.⁵⁶

Crèvecoeur’s experience of St. Peter’s—a church that was foreign to the new republic in many regards yet also newly capable of engaging prominent Anglo-Americans—reflects how he had likely come to view his ancestral faith as surprisingly beneficial to the United States. Given the intense history of anti-Catholicism in colonial New York, his promotion of Catholicism there was in effect a promotion of radical new possibilities for the religious freedom that many had come to hope would be a distinctive hallmark of the new nation. Furthermore, to promote Catholicism was to promote a religious vision and experience that definitively transcended the borders of the new United States. By the late 1770s, Crèvecoeur had come to believe that Protestantism—certainly dissenting Protestantism—was less likely to do so; that it could foster the deplorable radical individualism that he saw as animating many “patriots” in the Revolutionary War; and that it could be as inimical to religious freedom as Catholicism had ever been. These three points are made clear in Crèvecoeur’s little-known closet drama *Landscapes*, written in approximately 1777. Here Crèvecoeur speaks to his audience more directly than he does in *Letters*, and in a voice quite different from that of James. The play as a whole clearly presents “a bitter, deeply ironic denunciation” not only of the Revolution but also of a “whiggish egalitarianism” that seeks to destroy all “conventional markers of identity.”⁵⁷ The author’s Loyalist sympathies—and perhaps a Catholic sensibility—are evident as *Landscapes* implies that “only distant and established authority, not local and upstart power, can ensure the tranquility necessary for families to live in peace.” The “villains” of the play are earnest

Presbyterians with Ulster roots who run a "patriot committee of safety" in a rural district somewhere in the middle colonies. The play as a whole "voices the fear, grounded in a generic distrust of New Light enthusiasm, that an ideologically rigid Calvinism will be imposed as a state doctrine" in any new American republic. Here the casual "religious toleration" previously practiced in the middle colonies seems a "victim of war" as "the American Calvinist rhetoric of the chosen people" becomes "a source of Revolutionary violence," justifying "acts against helpless and innocent civilians" who resist the call to Revolution as providential.⁵⁸

Letters—particularly Letter III—has often been misread as one of the earliest articulations of a triumphant American exceptionalism; *Landscapes* directly mounts one of the earliest critiques of such exceptionalism. Crèvecoeur openly "scorns the notion that Americans are an elect, or more precisely, that Calvinist Americans are such." Intriguingly, his critique is at once consistent with certain tenets of the European Enlightenment, affirmative of the traditional family, and—arguably—affirmative of sound religious education. In *Landscapes*, Crèvecoeur argues not against religion itself but instead "against any religion dominating American life to the point where others are directly harmed by it." In doing so he employs "a form, the drama, that promises a nonsectarian affirmation of traditional moral values," including affirmation of self-restraint on behalf of a greater corporate good. The revolutionaries identified in the play itself as "pretended saints, veteran Puritans," in fact seem incapable of such restraint; they twist Scripture to advance their own self-interest and seem to have little theology aside from the doctrine of their own chosen-ness. They are "in fact inadequate interpreters of truth. Acting from passions, and not from reason," the "ill-educated religious fanatics" in *Landscapes* "force a narrow Calvinism upon society, destroying, in the name of God's mercy, the sustaining doctrine of family life—common mercy."⁵⁹

Crèvecoeur knew that an admirable human mercy could well be found outside the borders of British North America and was not incompatible with traditional understandings of God's mercy. One of the most straightforwardly positive depictions of Catholicism in his writings makes this clear. His unpublished sketch "Hospitals" features a narrator who lavishly praises women in Catholic religious orders because the care they provide to the sick and wounded "is far superior to any I Know of in civil society."

Roman Catholicism as described here is “remarkable” for “that singular charity which is displayed in those Hospitals which are attended by Nuns,” as these women are spurred by Christian “Zeal” to “devote themselves to the Relief of the sick equally Intent on the recovery of their bodys as well as the preservation of their souls.” Writing from somewhere in British America, this sketch’s narrator notes of Catholic hospitals that “this is the country where I shou’d think those Institutions are wanted, tho’ unfortunately ’tis incompatible with the spirit of Modern Protestantism.”⁶⁰

To what extent does this narrator speak for Crèvecoeur? Though the author indeed wore a somewhat bewildering number of “masks” in his life and in his writing, the scholar who first stressed this very point argued that he did write *sans* mask at times—and was entirely favorable in his depiction of French Catholic Canada when he did so.⁶¹ Not many in British America were so favorable in 1774, when Parliament’s Quebec Act was viewed as “Intolerable” precisely because it seemed too accommodating to Catholics in the previously French territory.⁶² American Patriots at the time saw the act as demonstrating a disturbing new laxness toward Catholicism on the part of Britain, and advocated revolution in part by arguing that the empire might allow the faith to spread south into the thirteen colonies. The perceived foreignness of Catholicism in the new United States, then, could hardly have been overlooked by Crèvecoeur. And given all that has been established regarding his life and his writing, it is easy to imagine that he would have been pleased when St. Peter’s of New York became a parish that included immigrants of a sort his fictional Farmer James had never imagined—including two currently being considered for canonization. Among its first parishioners was Pierre Toussaint, a Francophone Haitian of African descent who helped to found Catholic charities in New York; and Felix Varela, a Cuban-born priest and abolitionist who served at St. Peter’s decades later, founding the first Spanish-language newspaper in the United States and welcoming immigrants from Ireland at the time of the Great Famine.⁶³

The church’s best-known communicant, however, was the widowed daughter-in-law of William Seton, the very man who had initially encouraged Crèvecoeur to publish *Letters from an American Farmer*. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton’s 1805 conversion to Catholicism was fostered in part by her regular prayer before a gift to St. Peter’s in 1789 from the archbishop of Mexico City, a painting of the crucifixion by Mexican artist Jose Vallejo.⁶⁴

One can only imagine what Jefferson and other Anglo-American guests in attendance at Crèvecoeur's daughter's wedding made of the painting. The strangeness of its presence in the early United States is made clear by a comment of Elizabeth Seton's sister: appalled to learn that the newly widowed Elizabeth was interested in attending St. Peter's, she attempted to deter her by whispering, "They say, my sister, there is a great picture of Our Savior ALL NAKED--!"⁶⁵ The future saint herself wrote that this apparently scandalous image of Christ's body, which hung directly above the Eucharistic tabernacle, was in fact crucial to her conversion. As she prayed before it she begged "our Lord to wrap my heart deep in that opened side so well described in the beautiful crucifixion, or lock it up in his little tabernacle where I shall now rest forever."⁶⁶ Such "rest" was for Seton more active than contemplative. A mother of five who had already performed extensive charity work as an Episcopalian, on taking the habit of a nun she devoted her life to Catholic education in the United States. The order she founded, the Sisters of Charity, ultimately opened multiple hospitals like those Crèvecoeur's essay had praised in Quebec—including the first hospital west of the Mississippi, in what was then the U.S. frontier.

Seton's model for her order, the Daughters of Charity, was French; her conversion had been prepared for during an extended visit to Italy; and its final spur came via a work of Catholic art from Mexico. This first U.S.-born Catholic saint was called to join a Church that spanned both Atlantic and American borders to incorporate her, as it did Pierre Toussaint and Felix Varela. She created an order of women dedicated to tending to minds, bodies, and souls alike even as she witnessed the beginnings of a United States that would ultimately be far more diverse than the mix of northern Europeans that Farmer James spoke of in Letter III. Was Seton's labor "founded on the basis of nature, self-interest," as was the labor of the settlers described by James? Were she and the image of the wounded Christ that inspired her proper sources of fear? It is impossible to imagine that Crèvecoeur would have answered "yes" to either of these questions. Yet he knew that many citizens in the new United States feared the "foreign" Church that both nurtured Seton and emphasized Christ's Passion.

In *Letters from an American Farmer*, James and his minister alike indirectly reflect such fear as they initially seek to place suffering in old Catholic Italy, well outside the borders of British America. Yet James's text ends by incorporating images of such suffering within those borders, and depicting

the evil erection of rigid racial borders within the nascent United States—despite his desire to restrict horror to the periphery of the new nation (the western frontier) or to that portion of it that he initially compares to Latin America (the plantation South). Crèvecoeur's own Gothic imagination developed elliptically in relation both to his own complicated experience of Catholicism and to Anglo-American anxieties regarding the faith. Those anxieties would not abate in the long half-century following the American Revolution, decades in which popular Gothic fictions such as those of Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk responded to and stoked a virulent anti-Catholicism that led to the burning of an Ursuline convent in Massachusetts in 1834.⁶⁷ The judge who oversaw the subsequent trial, Lemuel Shaw, eventually became father-in-law to a writer of considerably greater merit than Reed or Monk, a literary giant whose work would mark the culmination of an era that has been deemed the American Renaissance. That writer was Herman Melville.