Chapter 6

Faith in Reading

Public Libraries, Liberalism, and the Civil Religion

THOMAS AUGST

"WHY LIBRARY architecture should have been yoked to ecclesiastical architecture . . . is not obvious, unless it be that librarians in the past needed this stimulus to their religious emotions," wrote William Poole in *The Construction of Library Buildings* (1881).[1] "The present state of piety in the profession renders the union no longer necessary and it is time that the bill was filed for divorce. The same secular common sense and the same adaptation of means to ends which have built the modern grain elevator and reaper are needed for the reform of library construction."

Poole's comment on the excesses of library ornament (see figure 6.1) begs a question: what was the sacral function of the public library? Poole himself was a moving force in the new profession of librarianship, and like many of his colleagues then and now would stake the credibility of his discipline on the functional utility and managerial efficiency that came to count as "common sense" in the era of industrial progress: libraries should be designed to serve their internal functions of preservation, storage, and circulation.[2] Indeed, one response to Poole's article noted that, "thorough librarian that he is," he could see "nothing in a library but a huddle of books, which he would get into

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[1] William Poole, "The Construction of Library Buildings" (1881), cited in Kenneth A. Breisch, *Henry Hobson Richardson and the Small Public Library in America: A Study in Typology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 219.

[2] Librarians of course play many different roles across many different kinds of institutions. Pioneers in the public library movement like Poole sought, however, through the creation of the American Library Association in 1876, the development of schools of library and information science, and their public writing and speaking more generally to appropriate cultural prestige and status for their work that was accorded to the traditional professions of law, education, and medicine. See Wayne Wiegand, *The Politics of an Emerging Profession: The American Library Association, 1876–1917* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), and Michael F. Winter, *The Culture of Control and Expertise: Toward a Sociological Understanding of Librarianship* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988).

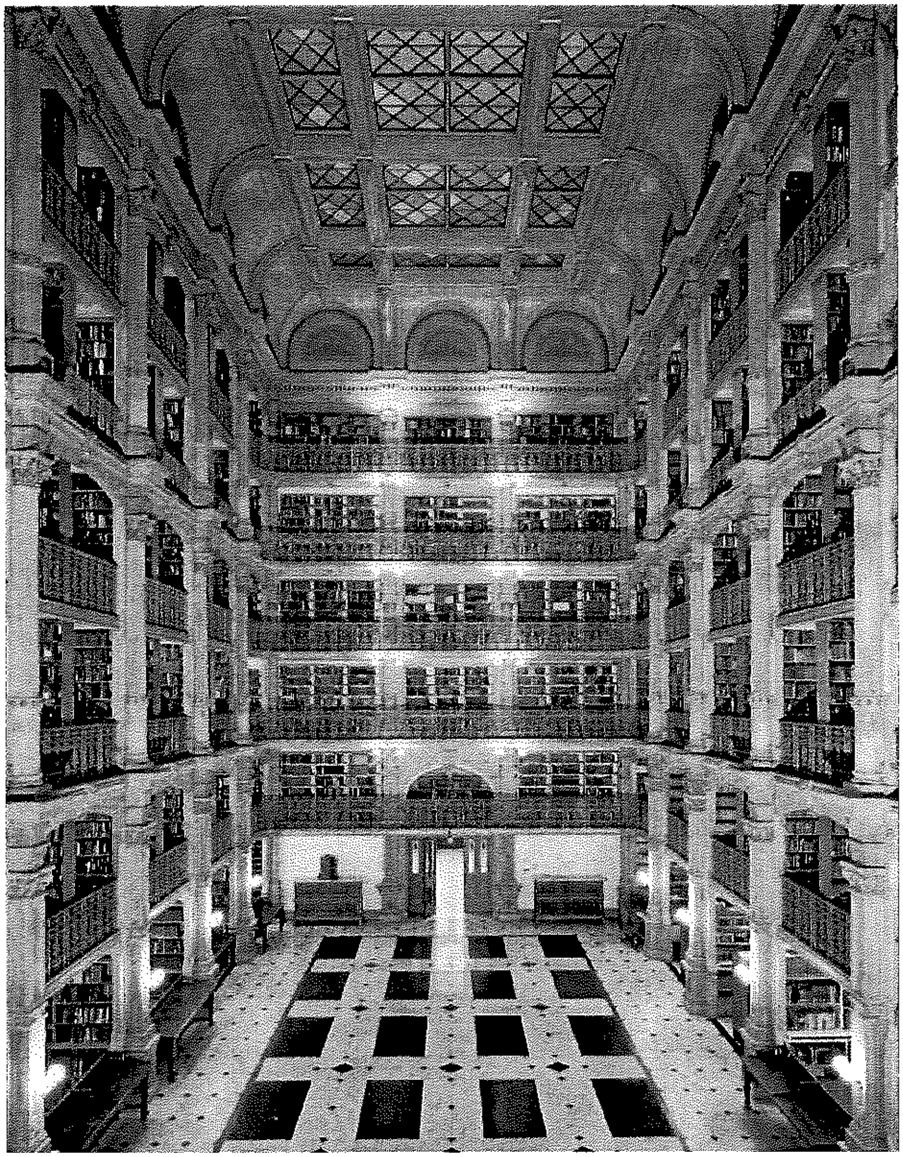

Figure 6.1. The Peabody Library at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, completed in 1878. For William Poole, this building owed more to ecclesiastical history than to the needs of modern libraries. Photo by Michael Dersin.

as little space as possible."[3] As with the threshing of wheat, libraries must organize their services and goods on the principles of mass production, rejecting religion and feeling alike as reflexes of a pre-modern mind. In the age of mechanical and electronic reproduction, every gadget or system promises to straighten the path to secular progress. For Poole and professional elites more generally, religion itself became an emblem of culture in its vestigial form: an aesthetic and sensual pleasure in merely symbolic experience, preventing the freedom from mental bondage and social caste systems on which the progress of modern society depended. But as Henry Adams might have noted, Poole had not overcome religious superstition but given it a new outlet in the secular cult of the dynamo. Suspicious of all trappings of Catholic devotion, liberal Protestants like Poole intuitively understood faith as an essentially private experience of edification and transcendence, mediated by the individual, solitary experience of reading that for hundreds of years had animated the reformation of Christian piety.

As Poole's metaphors only begin to suggest, the modern library would adapt itself to the practical organization and management of information. The "ecclesiastic architecture" of libraries from the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continues to seem archaic because, in part, we have forgotten the spiritual function that institutions of public culture were meant to serve, as what James Traub recently called "secular cathedrals" of liberal society.[4] Built with bygone fads for beaux-arts and Victorian gothic design, the immense marble buildings that loom over the horizon of cities and towns across the United States attest to "religious emotions" that librarians and ordinary patrons alike associated with civic institutions at the turn of the twentieth century. In her autobiography *The Promised Land* (1913), Mary Antin describes her girlhood experience as a Russian Jewish immigrant approaching the Boston Public Library.

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[3] Letter from Andrew Dickson White, 15 October 1881, Daniel C. Gilman papers, Ms. 1.53, Special Collections, Milton S. Eisenhower Library, Johns Hopkins University. While writing to Gilman, White repeated an anecdote that a student had passed on to him about the impression that the physical presence of books had made upon him: "He told me that he learned at once the importance of several things which he had never before known. When I asked him for the first of these, he said: 'Silence'. . . . Had Yale College Library been what Mr. Poole's system would now make it, I should have had far less respect for learning, literature and for the institution that I now have." I thank Ken Carpenter for bringing this and other reactions to Poole's argument to my attention.

[4] James Traub, "The Stuff of City Life," *New York Times Magazine,* 3 October 2004, 26. Neil Harris similarly describes the large private museums devoted to public culture, such as the Morgan Library, as "shrines to a secular religion that identified itself with the very pith of civilization." Neil Harris, "Collective Possessions: The J. Pierpont Morgan Library," in his *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 274.

> It was my habit to go very slowly up the low, broad steps to the palace entrance, pleasing my eyes with the majestic lines of the building, and lingering to read again the carved inscriptions: *Public Library—Built by the People—Free to All.* Did I not say it was my palace? Mine, because I was a citizen; mine, though I was born an alien . . . My palace—mine! . . . All these eager children, all these fine browed women, all these scholars going home to write learned books—I and they had this glorious thing in common, this noble treasure house of learning. It was wonderful to say, *This is mine;* it was thrilling to say, *This is ours.*[5]

At the laying of the cornerstone for the new building of the Boston Public in 1888, Oliver Wendell Holmes declared, "This Palace was the people's own," and Antin transforms the phrase into a democratic creed. As she recalls mounting the marble steps of a public library, Antin represents a book collection as a collective resource, a "noble treasure house" over which all citizens—be they eager children, fine women, scholars, or immigrants—have an equal claim. In a democracy, the "palaces" are public spaces, not private, and nobility is achieved through the acquisition of knowledge rather than the inheritance of property.

We might interpret such declarations of civic faith as evidence of how effectively libraries were used to propagate a conservative social and economic ideology of reform.[6] As Anglo-Protestant elites in the Northeast lost their local political dominance, they founded colleges, museums, hospitals, and other nonprofit benevolent and educational institutions in order to create new channels of leadership and social control free from the interference of elected officials and the church.[7] The steel magnate Andrew Carnegie believed public libraries were the best means for the Gospel of Wealth to serve the "permanent good" of the people because, as he put it in 1889, they stimulated "the best and most aspiring poor of the community to further efforts in their own self-improvement."[8] So too, with their formal administration as municipal institutions, libraries found themselves in the midst of explicit battles over the role of religion in public life. Orthodox and liberal Protestants fought over the opening of libraries and museums on Sundays.[9] It did not help the campaign to win tax support for libraries that elected officials tended to be Irish Catholic, and viewed all forms of public education as hostile to their faith. In 1901, for example, the Catholic hierarchy in New York briefly opposed non-Catholic libraries for its people. Its concerns were allayed only when provision was made for including a Catholic and a Jew on the board of directors of the public library.[10] In this context, as Evelyn Geller has noted, we should view the public library, like the school, as "an agency in the service of secularization, a self-conscious and controversial process of church-state separation."[11]

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[5] Mary Antin, *The Promised Land,* 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969; rpt. Princeton University Press, 1985), 341. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

[6] The standard histories of the public library movement remain Sidney Ditzion, *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture: A Social History of the American Public Library Movement in New England and the Middle States, 1850–1900* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1947), and Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England, 1629–1855* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949). As Dee Garrison has pointed out, public libraries provided "a rich focus for expressive meaning in Victorian America" which responded to "the sense of urban crisis and chaos; the fear of immigrant intruders; the emphasis upon the family as guarantor of tradition; the discontent of women and labor; the hope that education would right the wrongs of poverty and crime; the hunger for education among the poor; the ambitious paternalistic and humanitarian motives of reformers—all were as important to the content of library ritual as the need for a contented, disciplined, and busy wage force." Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876–1920* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 62.

[7] Peter Dobkin Hall sketches "the reorientation of the Old Standing Order" that took place over the nineteenth century, "from an elite with public responsibilities to a group whose influence was mediated through private institutions," which included colleges, museums, libraries, hospitals, and other benevolent institutions. Peter Dobkin Hall, *The Organization of American Culture, 1700–1900: Private Institutions, Elites, and the Origins of American Nationality* (New York: New York University Press, 1982), 122, 110.

But what if we took Antin's profession of wonder seriously, as an expression of a historically particular secular faith, a new kind of civil religion organized around public sites and symbols of reading? And how might such an approach to the social function of symbols require us to rethink the kinds of distinctions—between symbol and function, mind and body, text and context, the individual and the collective—that helped librarians modernize the mission of public libraries, and that continue to shape scholarly definitions of culture and society? As Dee Garrison has pointed out, the librarians often spoke "in broadly religious terms" about their missionary influence; pioneers of the profession such as Charles Ammi Cutter, Charles Jewett, and Samuel Swett Green were trained for the ministry before they joined the public library movement, where like other social reformers they sought to "restructure the Christian impulse" by creating a "secular ethical system."[12] By situating Antin's idealism in the context of her own life narrative as well as the debates about social reform that accompanied the rise of public libraries, we can sketch a lived experience of institutions of reading that Poole's bifurcation of value and utility leaves obscure. As I suggest in the pages that follow, the aesthetic and spiritual experience fostered by public libraries had social uses, performing four functions traditionally served by religion: the popularization of ethical practices; the organization and differentiation of attention; the definition of community; and the promotion of scripturalism, modes of moral authority that regulate and differentiate access to textual knowledge. By serving these spiritual functions in the lives of individuals like Mary Antin, the public library made particular habits of reading central to the rituals and pieties of secular modernity—one of the "new modes of social management and self-regulation" that would define liberalism as not only a form of governance but a faith in progress.[13]

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[8] Andrew Carnegie, "The Best Fields for Philanthropy," in *The Library and Society: Reprints of Papers and Addresses*, ed. Arthur Bostwick, (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1920), 35. For a study of the building of Carnegie libraries in their social and cultural context, see Abigail Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[9] On the debates over Sunday openings at the Boston Public Library that took place between 1859 and 1872, see Alexis McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday: The American Sunday* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 58–64.

[10] Phyllis Dain, *The New York Public Library: A History of Its Founding and Early Years* (New York Public Library, 1972), 31. Dain notes that a "comparatively small group of philanthropic persons, who were on the boards of schools, colleges, museums, hospitals, as well as libraries, were generally members of the . . . elite (Protestant or German-Jewish) that considered practical politics dirty and most Tammany politicians vulgar and venal, an attitude also prevalent well into the twentieth century among library trustees and libraries" (33). On the public arguments and political pressures that influenced the makeup of the New York Public's board of directors, see Dain, 249–52.

[11] Evelyn Geller, *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries, 1876–1939* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984), 10. As advocates "contended with dedicated adherents to older values," the professional "norm of neutrality" served to justify "a secular innovation and to protect the library from partisan control."

Antin's reflection is not a statement of fact, a positivist history of institutional workings, but rather a personal history of what the library meant to one patron. As such, it illuminates the new public presence and symbolic force that sites of reading had acquired in the lives of particular persons and communities by the later nineteenth century. The design and ornamentation of the Boston Public Library "generated a set of social rituals," as Sally Promey notes, that served its "cultural identification as liminal space . . . in which transformation in the status of individuals was presumed to occur."[14] Narrating both a girl's coming of age and an immigrant's conversion to what she would call the "gospel of liberty," *The Promised Land* demonstrates how the public library came to occupy this liminal space in the lives of ordinary people precisely by stimulating "religious emotions" toward particular habits, spaces, symbols, and objects of reading. Along with schools, playgrounds, museums, public parks, and other sites in the municipal landscape, public libraries in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century helped to institutionalize leisure as moral education, where individuals acquired the capacity for self-government requisite to the circumstances of a mobile and heterogeneous society. The public library in particular became a temple to a civil religion, a site not only to borrow books but also to practice devotions of self-realization that embody freedom in liberal democracies.

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[12] Garrison, *Apostles of Culture*, 37–38. As Justin Winsor noted, the first professional gathering in 1876 was "motivated by the idea that the library was 'in essentials a missionary influence'" (37).

[13] Building on Michel Foucault's late work on governmentality, scholars have recently sought to document the means by which populations of liberal democracies become self-regulating. Thus as Tony Bennett observes, liberalism entailed the historical "development of new forms of social management and regulation . . . creating frameworks in which individuals will voluntarily regulate their own behavior to achieve specific social ends," without the coercive power of the state. Bennett, *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (London: Sage, 1998), 110. For analysis of cultural formations in relation to neoliberalism, see Jack Z. Bratich, Jeremy Packer, and Cameron McCarthy, eds., *Foucault, Cultural Studies, and Governmentality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); and Justin Lewis and Toby Miller, eds., *Critical Cultural Policy Studies: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

[14] Sally M. Promey, *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent's "Triumph of Religion" at the Boston Public Library* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 153.

Freedom of Choice: Reading as Self-Ownership

Antin's exclamation on the steps of the Boston Public Library transforms an institution of public culture into a sacred shrine of democratic equality, which extends to "even" a poor Russian immigrant with an aristocratic desire for self-making, the capacious (if not grandiose) subjectivity with which many cultures have identified the exercise of power with the possession of knowledge. Whether portrayed in the enthusiastic tones of immigrant wonder or idealized by librarians and cultural reformers of the later nineteenth century, the citizen's encounter with public libraries had a paradoxical logic: individuals take personal ownership of their identity by entering public space. As her repetition of "me," "mine," "my," and "I" powerfully suggest, this young woman finds in the public library an opportunity to experience herself as an individual in newly compelling and intimate ways. "I felt the grand spaces under the soaring arches as a personal attribute of my being," Antin notes.[15] In liberal democracy, it is within the crowded spaces of public life where citizens find that being has personal attributes.

Like so many American narratives that place books in the path to self-invention—ranging from Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography,* through the narratives of ex-slaves, to autobiographies of Richard Wright and Malcolm X—Antin's confirms a long-standing American faith that education is a means to liberty. In telling of her voyage to the "promised land," Antin invokes, like so many other immigrants before and since, a typological interpretation that maps an Old Testament narrative of Exodus onto a geographical movement from old to new world.[16] As her exclamation on the steps of the BPL only begins to suggest, however, deliverance is not only collective—the escape of

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[15] Antin, *Promised Land,* 342.

[16] On the appropriation of typology to immigrant narrative, see Werner Sollars, "Typology and Ethnogenesis," in his *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 40–65.

Jews from persecution in the Russian Pale—but also individual: the escape of a girl from tribal superstitions and social codes enforced by religious patriarchy. In the first half of her narrative, oppression comes from outside the Jewish community, from hostile gentiles and Russian soldiers, but also from within, in the denial of education to women. No matter how poor a man was, "he was to be respected and set above other men if he was learned in the Law" (31). Not allowed to become scholars and rabbonim, girls were taught only enough to read prayers in Hebrew and follow their meaning by Yiddish translation. "It was not much to be a girl, you see," Antin observes. Without access to advanced literacy and the religious authority to which it was yoked, "a girl's real schoolroom was her mother's kitchen" (33, 34). Antin found her yearning for the "priceless ware" of "modern education" deepened by her father's alienation from religious tradition: "The rigid scheme of orthodox Jewish life offered no opening to any other mode of life" (75). Giving Antin access to learning that she had been denied during her childhood in the Pale, the public library represented a secular faith in the power of knowledge that depended on the "opening" of religious tradition itself and that rededicated the nation to its own civic ideals. Immigrants possessed a special "reverence" for learning that made them "pilgrims and voyagers for spiritual freedom," as Antin put it at a conference of librarians in 1913.[17]

Well before the Progressive Era, social and circulating libraries had assumed particular symbolic importance in defining this relationship to knowledge as "modern." In the 1798 autobiography of Stephen Burroughs, an itinerant schoolteacher and general confidence man, for example, we see that popular access to books already had become a primary reference point in the rhetoric of democratic freedom. When he arrived in Bridgehampton, Long Island, Burroughs found the community to be largely illiterate, "almost entirely destitute of books of any kind, except schoolbooks and the Bibles."[18] At some length, he recounts his efforts to remedy this general ignorance by forming a proprietary library consisting of "histories, and books of information upon secular subjects" (283). Bridgehampton's minister and judge, however, expected the town library to consist of "books in divinity, and dry metaphysical writings" (281), as he puts it. They accused Burroughs of "endeavoring to overthrow all religion, morality and order in the place; was introducing corrupt books into the library, and adopting the most fatal measures to overthrow all the good old establishments" (286). The minister and judge propose books on religion and ethics, while Burroughs proposes histories and "books of information upon secular subjects."

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[17] Mary Antin, "The Immigrant and the Library," *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 7 (1913): 147.

[18] *Memoirs of Stephen Burroughs of New Hampshire* (New York: Dial Press, 1924). The townspeople had opposed previous effort, because it was led by the minister, Mr. Woolworth, who would be choosing books: "They generally expect the library will consist of books in divinity, and dry metaphysical writings" (281). Burroughs promised proprietors that "histories, and books of information upon secular subjects, should give the leading cast to the complexion of the library" (283). For a recent discussion of Burroughs, the controversy over the library, and the contents of the Bridgehampton Library, see Susanna Ashton, "A Corrupt Medium: Stephen Burroughs and the Bridgehampton, New York Library," *Libraries and Culture* 38 (2003): 94–120.

Who shall control the reading of a community? As Burroughs represents it, this controversy over the content of the library was proxy for a more pressing contest over the moral authority of government that recapitulated the recently ended Revolution. The elites who preside over Bridgehampton are portrayed as irrational and rigid, incapable of the compromise, deliberation, or toleration expected from members of the learned professions. Flying into "ungovernable rage" when confronted with views that contradict their own, these worthies cannot be trusted to make decisions about the public good with the civility and disinterest requisite to the new republican order. As he advocated a less prescriptive, secular course of reading for the library, Burroughs grounded the constitution of social authority in the liberal values of free inquiry, natural rights, and private property: "To purchase such books with our money as we wished for was a right we inherited from nature" (291). Burroughs argues that traditional custodians of public interest—the church and the state—must defer to "the natural liberty" of men to be sovereign in their intellectual interests and literary tastes, no less than their political and economic rights: freedom itself is hard-wired in the mental and moral faculties of individuals, in the natural capacities for reason, will, and imagination. Indeed, to read books "wished for" entails a natural unfolding of the self specifically identified with a cash transaction, the right to purchase what one wants with one's money.

In tying the wishes of readers to the natural right of consumers, Burroughs's narrative dramatizes the emergence of one the central values of liberal modernity: that liberty depends upon the capacity for choice. As T. H. Breen has recently argued, the movement for American independence was made possible by the sudden expansion of the consumer marketplace. Throughout the colonies, as families of even modest means purchased the same imported teapots and fabrics, they came to share common "concerns about color and texture, about fashion and etiquette, and about making the right choices from among an expanding number of possibilities." Books too were among the new possibilities afforded by the commercial revolution of the late eighteenth century. In *The Algerine Captive* (1797), Royall Tyler's narrator is impressed, after seven years' absence from the new nation, to discover the "extreme avidity with which books of mere amusement were purchased and perused by all ranks of his countrymen." This "surprising alteration of taste" had been brought about by the spread of social libraries, "composed of books designed to amuse," which could now be found in even modest-sized inland towns, and by country booksellers, who now "filled the land" with "modern travels and novels almost as incredible" that had once been confined to the seaports and to the private libraries of gentlemen. As a result of this "surprising alteration in the public taste," Tyler notes, "all orders of country life, with one accord, forsook the sober sermons and practical pieties of their fathers, for the gay stories and splendid impieties of the traveler and the novelist."[19] Like Burroughs, Tyler suggests that social libraries and booksellers challenged elite intellectual hierarchies by making reading an expression of personal choice, bringing religious authority in particular into conflict with more secular tastes for goods and leisure.

Disseminated by the circulation of books no less than teapots, liberal values taught ordinary women and men to locate, as Antin puts it, "personal attributes" of one's being in the exercise of taste, within material forms of exchange and impersonal forms of kinship. By opening once-genteel concern with aesthetics, comfort, and status to ordinary people, this material culture created "a realm of intensely personal experience," Breen notes, in which middling sorts gained "the ability to establish a meaningful and distinct sense of self through the exercise of individual choice, a process of ever more egalitarian self-fashioning that was itself the foundation of a late eighteenth-century liberal society."[20] In a society increasingly oriented to individual pursuit of amusement in the marketplace, even religion could be treated as just another commodity, a mode of self-expression. "Modern" education in the liberal tradition entails not the inheritance of "good old establishments," but rather the extension of individual sovereignty over judgments as near as the book in one's hand and as distant as forms political representation.

Circulating and social libraries helped to give reading a new moral utility, identified not with adherence to theological prescriptions and professional hierarchies of learning, but with the habit of reading. As we see in the register book of a small social library formed in Taunton, Massachusetts, for example, the content of any particular book comes to matter less than the cultivation of taste as it unfolds through a diverse array of what Burroughs had discreetly termed "books of information upon secular subjects" (see figure 6.2). Over a few months in 1838, William Reed moves freely among biographies *(Life of Putnam, Life of Napoleon, Baylies's Historical Memoires)*, travel and natural history *(Narrative of a Voyage to the Ocean, History of Animals)*, and fiction *(The Sketchbook, Hope Leslie, Edgeworth's Works, The Prairie)*. Where H. L. Danforth sticks almost entirely to periodicals such as the *Edinburgh Review, London Quarterly, North American Review,* and the *Museum,* Nathan Connor reads almost nothing but tales. As members wrote the title of the work and the date of the loan, they created a profile of the preferences, intensity, duration, and sequence of their leisure reading visible to friends, neighbors, and other members. Each page of the register becomes a performance of personal choice. So too, circulating libraries ranging from short-lived operations such as Caritat's commercial library in New York to large nonprofit associations such as the Philadelphia Apprentices' Library or the New York Mercantile Library repeatedly sacrificed reservations about the moral influence of books to the commercial expedience of satisfying popular demand.[21] As thousands of such libraries were formed and dissolved throughout the nineteenth century, the freedom to choose books for amusement rather than instruction—whether deliberate or casual, in imitation of or indifference to others—became integral to the fashioning of a personal ethos through the individual development of literary taste.

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[19] Royall Tyler, *The Algerine Captive; or, The Life and adventures of Doctor Updike Underhill: six years a prisoner among the Algerines* (Walpole, NH, 1797), 4–7.

[20] T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), xv, xvi, 55.

Like the proprietary, social, and private or commercial circulating libraries, public libraries became institutions of "modern" education by helping to popularize reading itself *as a choice,* from among books "most wished for," within the mass market for goods and leisure. The Boston Public claimed to be the first state-supported library in the world to allow patrons to take books home. As its first annual report from 1852 suggests, its trustees had perhaps learned from social libraries the importance of institutionalizing reading as a practice of leisure rather than study—of organizing their policies of collection and circulation so that, "by following the popular taste," as the annual report of 1852 put it, "we may hope to create a real desire for general reading" among "the young, in the families and at the firesides of the greatest num-

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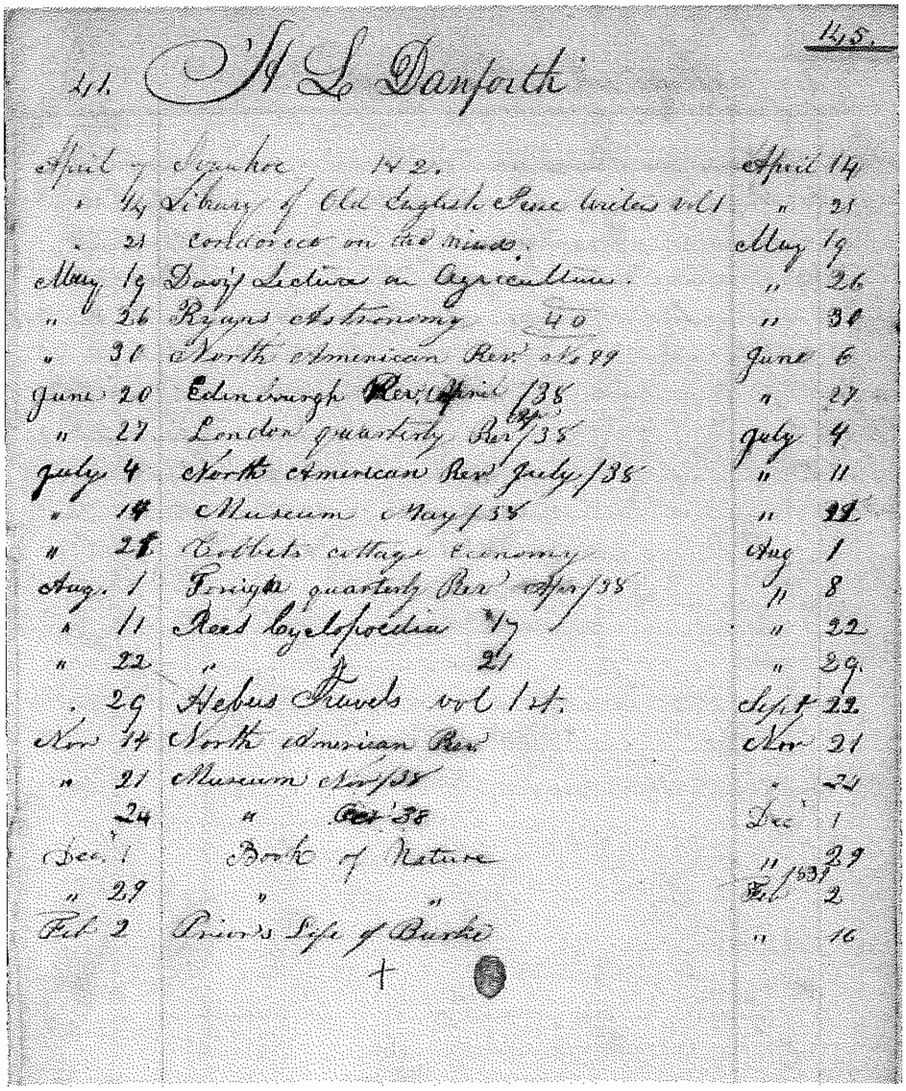
[21] On Caritat's library, see George Reddin, *"An Early Library of Fiction* (New York: George Reddin, 1940); on the Philadelphia Apprentices' Library, see John Frederick Lewis, *History of the Apprentices' Library of Philadelphia, 1820–1920* (Philadelphia: s.n., 1924); on the New York Mercantile Library, see Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) . For more general surveys of circulating libraries, see Haynes McMullen, *American Libraries before 1876* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000), David Kaser, *A Book for Sixpence: The Circulating Library in America* (Pittsburgh: Beta Phi Mu, 1980), and Shera, *Foundations.*



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41. H L Danforth

April 7	Ivanhoe 142.	April 14
" 14	Library of Old English Prose Writers vol 1	" 21
" 21	Condorcet on the mind.	May 19
May 19	Davy's Lectures on Agriculture.	" 26
" 26	Ryans Astronomy 40	" 31
" 31	North American Rev. No. 99	June 6
June 20	Edinburgh Rev. April /38	" 27
" 27	London quarterly Rev. Apr /38	July 4
July 4	North American Rev July /38	" 11
" 14	Museum May /38	" 21
" 21	Cobbets cottage Economy	Aug 1
Aug. 1	Foreign quarterly Rev Apr /38	" 8
" 11	Rees Cyclopoedia 17	" 22
" 22	" 21	" 29.
" 29	Hebers Travels vol 1st.	Sept 22
Nov 14	North American Rev	Nov 21
" 21	Museum Nov /38	" 24
24	" ~~Oct~~ '38	Dec 1
Dec. 1	Book of Nature	" 29
" 29	" "	1839 Feb 2
Feb 2	Prior's Life of Burke	" 16

Figure 6.2. Register for the Taunton Social Library, ca. 1830s–1850s. Courtesy of the Manuscripts and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.

ber of persons in the city."[22] From commercial and circulating libraries the Boston Public adopted the principle of purchasing multiple copies, so that "many persons, if they desire it, can be reading the same work at the same moment," "at the only time they care for it—that is, when it is living, fresh, and new. Additional copies . . . should continue to be bought almost as long as they are urgently demanded." How did the trustees defend their controversial and innovative ambition to spread "the more popular literature" throughout the city? For reading itself to become a "real desire," they argued, "as many [books] as possible" must find their way "into the home of the young; into poor families; into cheap boarding houses; in short wherever they will be most likely to affect life and raise personal character and condition." As they circulated new kinds of "popular" or "ephemeral" materials previously deemed unworthy of collection and preservation, lowered age requirements for unsupervised visits, eventually opened access to shelves, and later allowed patrons to check out multiple works of fiction at the same time, public libraries sought to popularize leisure reading among what they repeatedly called the urban "masses" with the explicit aim of transforming "personal character and condition." In this sense, as they sought to identify and respond to "real desire" for books, Boston Public and other libraries helped to make the choice of reading a secular form of ethical practice and a modern habit of self-government.

Sacralizing Public Space: The Habitat of Reading

The administration of the Boston Public Library rested with cultured elites and the managerial professional class, and the patronage was largely middle class; but the ideal public for the library, as for the public school, was the immigrant. Horace Wadlin's 1905 history of the Boston Public Library declared that there was "a duty resting upon us of extending the influence of the library, as a civic institution, towards enlarging the life and broadening the intellectual outlook of these who have recently entered the ranks of American citizenship without preliminary training in the English tongue."[23] The library was more than a means of education—"a civic institution" whose purpose was to furnish a moral breadth to immigrants whose "life" and "outlook," had been unduly narrowed by the pathology of the slum. In defending the accusation that their reading rooms harbored "loungers" and "dependents," Charles Recht in the *New York Times* in 1908 similarly linked the utility of the New York Public libraries to the moral power of habitat. The mission of reading rooms, Recht declared, was "to be the study rooms of ambitious poor men whose homes in the crowded tenements are filthy, noisy, and dark. Here, after the day's hard work, could come the eager workingman and find the books he needs and desires and learn to live instead of merely existing." The point was not simply to circulate books in the slums, as Ticknor had initially suggested in his 1852 report on the Boston Public, but to rescue the poor from the filth, noise, and darkness that kept them from answering their "needs and desires" in books. The sensory privations of poverty snuffed out the idealism and ambition that distinguish "learn(ing) to live" from "merely existing."[24]

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[22] *Report of the Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston* (Boston, 1852), 17.

[23] Cited in Promey, *Painting Religion in Public*, 160. On the development of library services for immigrants, see Plummer Alston Jones, Jr., *Libraries, Immigrants, and the American Experience* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999).

At the very end of her autobiography, Antin returns to the steps of the Boston Public, where she enacts this distinction as a sort of cosmic revelation. After a school outing to the seashore with a science club, Antin "stood on the broad stone steps," alone as she watched a streetcar carry her friends out of sight:

> My heart was full of stirring wonder. I was hardly conscious of the place where I stood, or of the day, or of the hour. I was in a dream, and the familiar world around me was transfigured. My hair was damp with sea spray; the roar of the tide was still in my ears. Mighty thoughts surged through my dreams, and I trembled with understanding.
>
> I sank down on the granite ledge beside the entrance to the Library, and for a mere moment I covered my eyes with my hand. In that moment I had a vision of myself, the human creature, emerging from the dim places where the torch of history has never been, creeping slowly into the light of civilized existence, pushing more steadily forward to the broad plateau of modern life, and leaping, at last, strong and glad, to the intellectual summit of the latest century. (363–64)

Religions sacralize time and space, helping us form convictions about what is important, helping us to focus, train, and concentrate our attention within particular environments. They do this not merely through abstract symbols that ask us to contemplate particular concepts or meanings, but by transforming the way we perceive and comport ourselves in the physical and social world. Or, as Henry James puts it in his own 1907 account of confronting the new building of the Boston Public Library, they translate "an academic phrase" such as democracy into a "bristling fact."[25] In Antin's revelation, this takes the form of a sacralization of the physical site of a library, motivated by an emotional, indeed spiritual, realization of what, exactly, liberty in the new world means for an immigrant girl: "I sank down on the granite ledge beside the entrance to the Library, and for a mere moment I covered my eyes with my hand. In that moment I had a vision of myself," Antin writes. "On the granite ledge," Antin literally *sees* herself differently, suddenly understanding with a sort of cosmic self-consciousness the relationship between her personal growth and her environment. With the humility and reverence due our most cherished deities, Antin practiced otherwise abstract civic ideals by sitting on stone, walking up a marble staircase, and whispering in the vast reading room of Bates Hall (see figure 6.3). In this sense, Antin's experience exemplified the point made by N. H. Morison, the provost of the Peabody Institute, in his defense of the Peabody Library from William Poole's criticism: "A grand hall, filled with the gathered wisdom of ages visibly set in alcoves chastely but richly ornamented, will impress the young student with a respect for books and a sense of their importance which he will never forget, and which no multiplication of 'stacks' will ever give."[26]

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[24] Charles Recht, "Usefulness of Public Libraries," *New York Times*, 15 August 1908, BR453.

[25] Henry James, *The American Scene* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 249.

Especially with the City Beautiful movement in urban design and architecture, symbols of civic dignity abounded in American urban spaces at the turn of the twentieth century. At libraries, museums, and concert halls, no less than post offices, city halls, and train stations, the monumental design of public architecture transformed the sensory and perceptual experience of city life. These new institutions were among the primary vehicles in a broad, transatlantic campaign for social reform that extended liberal government into physical, social, and psychological dimensions of the urban environment. As they sought to impress citizens with "a respect for books," as Morison put it, public libraries located and organized aesthetic and moral experience of mass culture within the quotidian pathways and vistas of everyday life. This was not, of course, the same notion of culture that modern scholars have derived from the relativism of the modern social sciences, as a general way of life, but rather "norms of human perfection," as the educational reformer Matthew Arnold put it in his influential treatise *Culture and Anarchy* (1882).[27] Although committed to hierarchal distinctions of value, this definition of culture encompassed an evolutionary conception of social development that would be advanced by the modern sciences of anthropology, psychology, and economics in the later nineteenth century. For Arnold, the study of culture

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[26] University Circulars (11 May 1883), 151, Special Collections, Milton S. Eisenhower Library, Johns Hopkins University.

[27] Nancy Bentley describes this relativist, anthropological concept of culture as "the web of institutions and lived relations that structure any human community." Nancy Bentley, *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23.

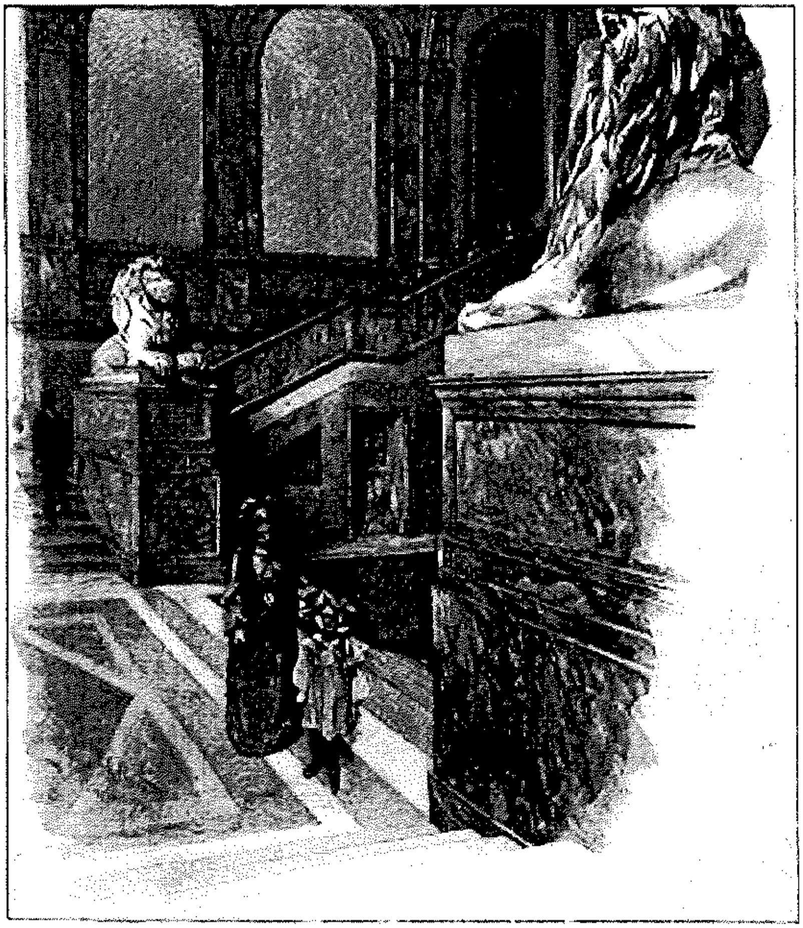

Figure 6.3. "The First Landing of the Main Staircase," engraving from T. R. Sullivan, "The New Building of the Boston Public Library," *Scribner's Magazine*, January 1896, 86.

was progressive and normative; it encouraged adjustments of behavior, by which individuals might "draw ever nearer to a sense of what is indeed beautiful, graceful, and becoming."[28] By fostering the cultural tastes of their members, liberal societies would progress to higher levels of "civilization."

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[28] Cited in Bennett, *Culture*, 94. On the development of the concept of culture, see Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958). On the reach of Arnold's work in the United States, see John Henry Raleigh, *Matthew Arnold and American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961). On the intellectual background of the British

As liberal reformers on both sides of the Atlantic advanced the cause of public institutions of education and recreation, they helped to develop a governmental concept of culture, associated less with personal consumption and status display than with the reproduction of moral character and the utilitarian calculus of social welfare. As Tony Bennett points out, "the most ardent advocates of public museums, free libraries and the like typically spoke of them in connection with courts, prisons, poorhouses, and, more mundanely, the provision of public sanitation and fresh water."[29] Culture meant not only the cultivation of personal taste by which, as Franklin put it in describing the influence of the Library Company, tradesmen and farmers acquired the conversational skills of gentlemen. Like the provision of sanitation or lighting, it was an investment in the general quality of life that would generate the largest benefit for the greatest number. In *Methods of Social Reform* (1883), the economist W. Stanley Jevons turned to the example of free public libraries to illustrate what he called the principle of the multiplication of utility:

> The main raison d'etre of free public libraries, as indeed of public museums, art-galleries, parks, halls, public clocks, and many other kinds of public works, is the enormous increase of utility which is thereby acquired for the community at a trifling cost. . . . If a man possesses a library of a few thousand volumes, by far the greater part of them must lie for years untouched upon the shelves; he cannot possibly use more than a fraction of the whole in any one year. But a library of five or ten thousand volumes opened free to the population of a town may be used a thousand times as much.[30]

Largely an American and British experiment, state sponsorship of public libraries and other agencies of public culture entailed enormous capital investment in the leisure and education of the working classes that had to be continually defended and justified as social engineering. Charles Recht, writing in the *New York Times* in 1908, saw the library as a duty that taxpay-

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public library movement, see Alistair Black, *A New History of the English Public Library: Social and Intellectual Contexts, 1850–1914* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996). On the administration of education and culture as modes of liberal governance, see Ian Hunter, *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education* (Houndmills, U.K.: Macmillan, 1988), and Hunter, *Rethinking the School: Subjectivity, Bureaucracy, Criticism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994). For comparative and multinational perspectives on neoliberal cultural policy, see Franco Bianchini and Michael Parkinson, eds., *Cultural Policy and Urban Regeneration: The Western European Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); and Tony Bennett, Michael Emmison, and John Frow, *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

29. Bennett, *Culture,*109.

30. Cited in ibid., 108.

ers owed to the general welfare of society, a public obligation with personal benefits: "Society is under no obligation to provide necessaries, but it is under a duty to make its members orderly and educated. This is not charity—it is self-protection." Especially in an era marked by labor unrest, liberal democracies had to defend themselves from the inequalities and political instability that laissez-faire capitalism could wreak. Whatever good culture might do for particular persons, its aggregate goods became newly valuable to municipal budgets and private philanthropy. Through public baths, settlement houses, youth clubs, and park systems, as well as libraries, the state might "make" society "orderly and educated" without resorting to force. Committed to scientific and empirical models of individual and social development, and attuned to the power of the environment to shape behavior, the ideology and policies of liberalism described culture as a dynamic process by which individuals acquired a capacity for autonomy, that "learning to live" that gave one person's existence value for "society," worth collective investment and sacrifice. To conservative critics, both then and now, the expansion of liberal welfare represented a dangerous turn to socialist paternalism. Thus in 1894 did one writer, following theories of the social Darwinist Herbert Spenser, attack tax support for free libraries as a slippery slope to "a low and promiscuous communism."[31]

To align libraries with "public works" was to identify reading and leisure more generally as collective resources that, like water, must be widely distributed and managed in the interests of an entire community's health. In Jevons's accounting, the *quantity* of reading, as administered through enlightened and expert social policies, would transform the *quality* of public life. Since the incidence of libraries tended to be highest in residential areas that had lighting and sanitation, Jevons noted, "We are fully warranted in looking upon free libraries as engines for operating upon the poorer portions of the population."[32] By helping to reduce poverty and the cost of law enforcement, spending on "public works" such as free libraries would bring social and political rewards. By "operating" on the entire habitat of urban life, the circulation of books made the public library an "engine" of progressive reform, especially for ethnic immigrants, who did not have access to middle-class amenities or traditions.[33] As the *New York Times* observed in 1890, "A certain number of persons within the radius of its influence will be sure to devote less time to drink, to dangerous gossip, to the perils of beer saloons and dance halls."[34] In this sense, the "palaces" that cities erected for their main libraries were merely the most visible hub of institutional networks that, through branches and circulation depots, saturated the local environment of the immigrant and working classes with books. In 1910, for example, the New York Public Library had a traveling library office that, as Phyllis Dain observed, circulated more than a million volumes at 802 "stations," including:

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[31] M. D. O'Brien, "Free Libraries," in Bostwick, *The Library and Society,* 203. As O'Brien notes, "Are theatre-goers, lovers of cricket, bicyclists, amateurs of music, and others to have their earnings confiscated, and their capacities for indulging in their own special hobbies curtailed, merely to satisfy gluttons of gratuitous novel-readers? A love of books is a great source of pleasure to many, but it is a crazy fancy to suppose that it should be so to all" (209). This piece originally appeared in a collection edited by Thomas Mackay, *A Plea for Liberty* (London, 1894).

[32] Cited in Bennett, *Culture,* 115.

> public schools, playgrounds, police precinct houses, fire stations, factories, hospitals, parochial and private schools, industrial schools, churches and Sunday schools, study clubs, department stores and other places of business, the YMCA and YWCA, asylums and charitable institutions, home libraries, mothers clubs, literary societies, and study clubs and community libraries located in settlements, clubs, stores, and churches. It also distributed used books to newsboys' clubs, fresh-air homes, sailors' reading rooms, tuberculosis camps, reform schools, hospitals, mental hospitals, prisons. . . .[35]

The liberal state's administration of libraries and other institutions of public culture helped to standardize and centralize the experience of time and space. The temporal discipline imposed by public clocks helped to coordinate and direct the use of leisure in spaces like parks, museums, and libraries, which were regulated by particular hours of operation no less than the complex array of rules and informal norms that actively shaped behavior in public. Signs asked people to stay off the grass, or to not touch art; reading room policies restricted food and drink while their attendants enforced silence and order. By organizing experience according to middle-class norms of character and propriety, liberal institutions of public culture sought to transform the personalities of patrons. If the "self-governing liberal subject was master of the baser instincts and passions, a creature of thrift, energy, perseverance and, critically, reflexive evaluation of its own civility," as Chris Otter observes, then these institutions shaped the aesthetic sensibility of individuals toward the larger pathology of the environment in which they moved: "Respectability involved a certain distancing, and sight, as the primary sense of distance, played a critical role in its performance."[36] The organization of civic space was not only symbolic but physical, its values embodied in the aesthetic and moral performance of new social identities. These rituals and practices transformed the otherwise anonymous experience of walking in a city or killing time into spiritual exercises in self-making that—like all modes of religion—are highly ideological and deeply personal. By walking up the marble stairs, for instance, or engaging in any number of impersonal and anonymous experiences of public culture which, because "free to all," belonged to no one in particular, one could, like Antin, craft self-conscious identities outside the realities and spaces to which many of her peers were consigned by class, gender, ethnicity, and race.

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[33] As Ronald and Mary Zboray have noted, the public library formalized and centralized patterns of exchange and sociability that had characterized antebellum home libraries, translating them to monumental and bureaucratic institutions. Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Home Libraries and the Institutionalization of Everyday Practices among Antebellum New Englanders," in *The Library as an Agency of Culture*, ed. Thomas Augst and Wayne Wiegand (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 63–86.

[34] "Free Circulating Library," *New York Times*, 2 March 1890.

[35] Dain, *The New York Public Library*, 297.

Libraries helped to sacralize public space by altering the aesthetic perceptions of ordinary people, lending to the experience of otherwise common existence moral direction and spiritual consequence. Public libraries had practical impact on how, simply put, ordinary people saw the world and moved within it. As Antin reminds us, the capacity to see beyond the narrow realities of the tenement—to be edified by the silence, cleanliness, or majesty of public "palaces"—directly shapes our ability to recognize and assert our autonomy as social actors and moral agents. "I was hardly conscious of the place where I stood, or of the day, or of the hour," Antin recalls, and it is the dislocation from her normal sense of time and place that makes possible her new birth as "the human creature," instead of a girl, an immigrant, or a Jew. Rendered in metaphors of organic growth ("emerging," "pushing," "leaping"), the conversion experience of the immigrant echoes the transcendentalist natural theology that Antin would have absorbed from her friendships with Emma and Josephine Lazarus. That conversion depends on a psychological and sensory distancing from the mundane, quotidian facts of one's actual existence, the substitution of environments more congenial to the transcendence of individuals. By "enlarging" and "broadening" the immigrant's horizons of vision and movement, as Wadlin put it, institutions of culture like the Boston Public Library helped to organize the spiritual meaning and form of individuality. Within these new public spaces, citizens could locate and perform a new kind of symbolic identity allied with the organic evolution of personality: the progress of a person, rather than a species or group.

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[36] Chris Otter, "Visuality, Materiality and Liberalism," *Social History* 27 (2002): 2.

Culture as Traffic: Reading and Social Mobility

In *The American Scene* (1907), Henry James also recounts a voyage from the old world to the new that brings him to the Boston Public Library. Written by an eminent American novelist returning stateside in 1904, after many years living in Europe, the book uses the author's encounter with the library's new building to describe how the meaning and form of culture were altered by forces of social change. James sees what had to be destroyed to accommodate the presence of so many immigrants like Mary Antin. Only a few blocks from Copley Square, he passes the Boston Athenæum, a "temple of culture," "honored haunt of all the most civilized." A gentlemen's club to which, at least in retrospect, the city had paid deference, the Athenæum was now sadly diminished: "rueful and snubbed" not only by the "brute masses" of surrounding tall buildings that hovered over it the way that roughs bullied "a studious little boy," but also by the procession of foreign born who walked by utterly oblivious of the respect expected for it from their Brahmin betters.[37] "Gross aliens," making "no sound of English, in a single instance," immigrants were in "serene and triumphant possession" of the once-homogenous city that he and other Anglo-Protestant "natives" had once thought, in its "closed order," they owned (231, 233). Once he reaches the Boston Public Library, James is overwhelmed by "the multitudinous bustle, the coming and going, as in a railway station, of persons with carpet-bags and other luggage, the simplicity of plan, the open doors and immediate accesses, admirable *for* a railway station, the ubiquitous children, *most* irrepressible little democrats of the democracy." Once private and exclusive, the old cultural order had surrendered to the noise and motion of the streets, and James searches the building in vain for "deeper depths," for "some part that should be within some other part, sufficiently withdrawn and consecrated, not to constitute a thoroughfare"(251).

Whereas the Boston Public Library provides Antin with the occasion to declare her self-ownership, it becomes for James a scene of dispossession and alienation—not merely the personal loss of the "old order" to which the Athenæum had conferred privileged access, but a diminution of value that culture suffers when its benefits are so widely distributed. James observed that the great national libraries in Paris and London, though "at the disposal of the people," kept the public at a proper distance, "there more or less under the shadow of the right waited for and conceded" (250). In their determination to be public places, however, public libraries had given themselves over to the circulation of immigrants and children, doing away with the *penetralia* essential "in a place of study and meditation," by which libraries ought to resemble temples and through which the experience of culture is itself "consecrated" to "deeper depths" of the mind and spirit. According to James's calculus, the benefit of culture ought to exact humility and deference, transforming the scholar's labor into a sacred devotion undertaken in solitude and silence. Without the *penetralia* requisite for spiritual transactions of study, however, the Boston Public Library was like a "temple without altars," exemplifying "the distinction between a benefit given and a benefit taken, a borrowed, a lent, and an owned, an appropriated convenience" (249). To make culture so open to the public, without exacting obligations or debts for this access, is, indeed, to reduce its "benefits" to the divisible goods of utilitarianism. Arguing that true culture can never properly be made public, James concludes that what the Boston Public Library resembles most of all is a train station: A temple without altars, culture without prayer, movement without redemption.

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[37] James, *American Scene*, 232–33. Further page references are inserted in the text.

Religions are, however, modes of social mobilization that allow us to cultivate the pleasures of worship within bounds of community. One of the most powerful functions of the public library, and of the liberal faith in institutions of culture it represented, was to foster a sense of social membership that defied distinctions of gender, class, ethnicity, or education that normally divide and balkanize a population. Thus while Mary Antin insists on her personal ownership of the "palace" of the Boston Public, she stresses as well the presence of other people within the civic space: "All these eager children, all these fine browed women, all these scholars going home to write learned books—I and they had this glorious thing in common, this noble treasure house of learning. It was wonderful to say, *This is mine;* it was thrilling to say, *This is ours.*"[38] Liberal reformers sought to heighten this sense of community by insisting that the utility of reading in a democracy was not primarily scholarly but social, to effect an identification with others unlike oneself. When a site for the main branch of the New York Public Library was being selected, a newspaper editorial observed that "to become really a 'free public library' " required an institution to "be in easy communication . . . with every part of the city."[39] As sites of "communication" within the physical landscape of the nineteenth-century city, libraries helped to foster new experiences of community: a community not of readers sharing the same texts, but for readers sharing the same spaces—a thoroughfare organizing the movements of a heterogeneous social world. In the United States, as James puts it, "every one is 'in' everything," and "society" is "more and more the common refuge and retreat of the masses" (249).

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[38] Antin, *Promised Land,* 341.

[39] "The Public Library," *New York Times,* 15 August 1895.

In press coverage that attended the building of these flagship libraries, it was precisely the novelty of this social mixing that aroused the most comment from observers. In 1891 the *Boston Daily Globe* complained that the new building would eliminate the class segregation of the old Boylston building, which directed "the plain people" to the Lower Hall, stocked with more "popular" reading matter and more accessible to street traffic. To make their way to the reading room in the new building, these people would now be forced to ascend the grand staircase "with everyone else, and rub elbows with the Beacon st. swell, the teacher and all the varying classes of people who are now accommodated in Bates Hall, upstairs," the dignity and ease of their leisure spoiled by having to "brush against fine ladies and rub elbows with men who are spick and span in their fashionable clothes."[40] But, then, this was precisely the promiscuous mingling that reformers sought to achieve, since it would diffuse a moral authority of learning that remained too associated with aristocratic privilege. By bringing together individuals usually separated by neighborhood, the public space of the library allowed immigrants and the destitute to identify with their social betters, offering them examples of self-improvement and propriety necessary to their own upward mobility. In their 1891 report, the trustees of the Boston Public declared that the new Bates Hall would be "designed as a general reading-room for the whole people . . . built for the accommodation of all the citizens of Boston, without reference to so-called 'class' or condition," without any "apparent separation of the poorer users of the Library from the richer."[41] (See figure 6.4.) Through a process of mutual recognition, emulation, and identification, readers would, presumably, learn to do without the categories which kept them from seeing themselves, and being seen by others, as part of "the whole people" and "citizens of Boston."

The traffic passing through the great depot of the library would lead, presumably, upward and outward to social advancement. An article in the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1892 offered a detailed sketch of the eccentricity and improvidence that the BPL made available to the amusement of bourgeois propriety:

> Probably the most original of the habitués of the reading room is a German by birth, his English being very bad. Every evening at 6:30 he enters the Lower

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[40] Cited in Walter Muir Whitehill, *Boston Public Library: A Centennial History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 153.

[41] Cited in ibid., 155.

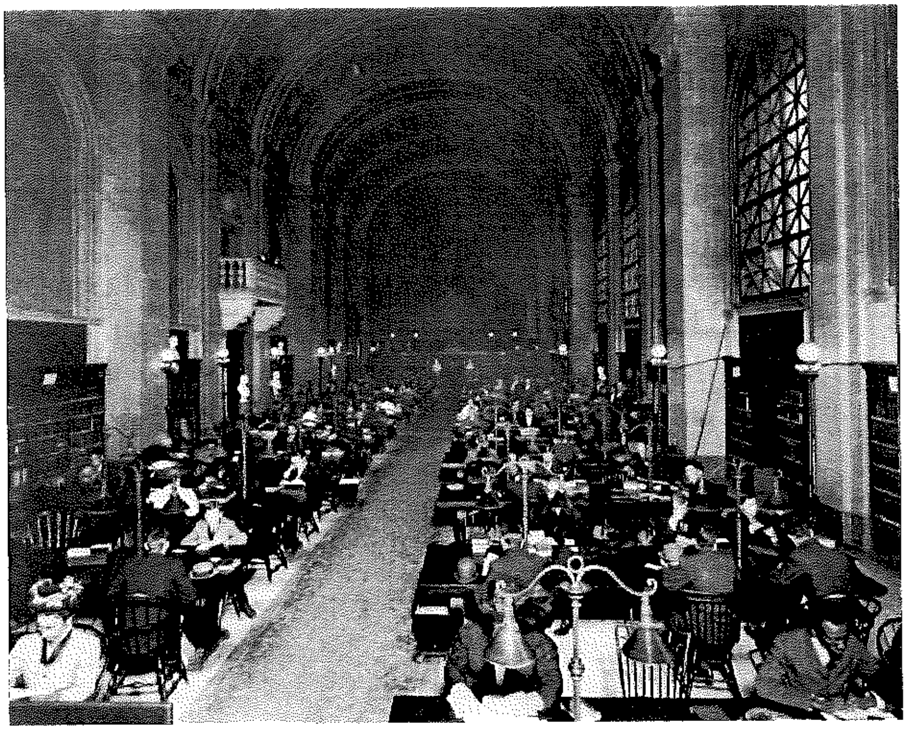

Figure 6.4. Photograph of Bates Hall in the Boston Public Library, by Nathanial Stebbins, 1914. Reprinted by permission of the Boston Public Library.

> Hall, walks over to the registration desk and looks at the clock. He then crosses the room where hangs the thermometer, at which he takes a good look. Turning, he makes a line for the thermometer in the reading-room and reads the condition of the temperature. If he is satisfied, all is well; if not, he expresses his disapproval very decidedly. He then calls for the *Pilot* and takes his favorite seat in the front of the room. At about eight o'clock he is asleep. He has not missed an evening since 1880.[42]

The library's utility as a civic space depended on the discipline and rationality with which individuals pursued their self-improvement in the company of strangers. As they proved unable to alter habits and routines fixed by poverty, however, these "aliens" turned Bates Hall into a way station on the track to nowhere. At best, many critics saw the library's investment in its public status—the elaborate building as well as the stunning artwork by John Singer Sargent and others—as a detraction from its core functions, as when another habitué of the reading room in 1895 observed, "within the space of one hour, a troop of eleven women tourists, two bands of school-girls personally conducted by their mistresses, besides scores of sight-seers of all ages, alone or in groups of varying numbers."[43] At worst, the fear of outsiders in the temple of culture—children and immigrants, the homeless and tourists—became outright fear of physical and moral contamination, as with the idea that books circulated in the slums would spread cholera to the suburbs, like pathogens of class breakdown.

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[42] Cited in ibid., 153.

In both their aggressive marketing campaign to justify public taxation for library services, and their monumental designs of entrances, staircases, catalogues, reading rooms, and entrances to buildings, libraries helped to identify a modern public, "the People," with a new kind of social space. This public was not, as Benedict Anderson argued in his theory of modern nationalism, a virtual community, effected by the symbolic "imagination" of readers who, through novels and newspapers, entered into a shared sense of territorial and temporal simultaneity. Nor was it an anonymous "public sphere" constituted by the mass circulation of texts. It was, rather, a physical space where social difference became visible, a larger theater of the heterogeneous diversity that characterized nineteenth-century cities but was otherwise obscured by the residential, occupational, and commercial segregation of the population amongst slums and street-car suburbs, "downtown" business and vice districts, crowded ethnic tenements and single-family middle-class homes. If James laments the busy, crowded movements within the library's halls as a distraction from the traditional mission of culture, Antin argues the opposite: libraries should foster reading not as a refuge from the crowded spaces of public life, but rather as a means of transport within it, a hub for traffic in social identities.

In its simultaneous unity and diversity, the community that worshiped at the public library was made of *individuals* rather than social types. Patrons *might* learn to see their "so-called" differences of "class" and "condition" not as determined by environment, but as the outcome of their own initiative and self-motivation in moving across public institutions of education and culture. As the first report of the Boston Public had pointed out in 1852, a large public library would consummate the public school system by giving students means to achieve "the farther progress of education, in which one must be mainly his own teacher."[44] As the 1914 report of trustees similarly observed, the library

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[43] Cited in ibid., 176.

[44] *Report of the Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, July 1852* (Boston, 1852), 8.

"educated only in response to individual wants and demands. Everything that is done is done in response to requests from individuals who ask for that which they each want most," in contrast to education in schools "imposed on those who receive it."[45] The public library would grow and expand, accordingly, as individuals consummated their otherwise abstract faith in freedom by taking responsibility for their own self-improvement, by practicing self-culture. So, too, a 1913 article about immigrants and public libraries correlated the foreigner's "insatiate" reading habits and "appetite for knowledge" with his rapid escape from the ethnic ghetto: "the ultimate success of the immigrant in New York may be measured by the distance he moves from lower Manhattan."[46] In this context, reading is less a solitary process of meditation and study, what James suggests to be a "deep" space of moral and intellectual communion, than a prosaic vehicle for physical and social mobility, a normative and institutional means of "civilization" and "uplift."

Fiction and the Scriptures of the Modern Self

Antin's romance of public life, and James's alienation from it, both bear witness to the historical emergence of institutions and values of print culture—particular ways of thinking about and acting upon the benefits of reading and embodying them in symbolic and functional forms of social life. What, James asks, is the value of reading, and of culture more generally that has made such unholy alliance with the quotidian movements of mass society? Even if one conceded "to the New Land the fact of possession of everything and convenient under heaven," of "all the accessories and equipments, a hundred costly things, parks and palaces and institutions, that the earlier community had lacked" (248), the city seemed to James "to have no capacity for the uplifting *idea,* no aptitude for the finer curiosity, to envy the past." With its grand spaces and elegant furnishings, the Public Library "was committed to speak to one's inner perception still more of the power of the purse and of the higher turn for business than of the old intellectual, or even of the old moral, sensibility" (248, 249). Facilitating social transactions with the dispatch and efficiency of business, new institutions of public culture fostered access at the cost of transcendent value, "the uplifting *idea*"—reformatting the meaning of culture for a country whose main formula, as James lamented, was "to make so much money that you won't 'mind,' don't mind anything" (237).

What James minds, of course, is what he perceives to be profound changes in where and how Western culture does its thinking. With the displacement of an "old" intellectual and moral sensibility by a liberal imperative of "not minding," the value of reading shifts from the object of study and the attention the individual reader brings to it—in the transcendental, Kantian emancipation of spirit or insight through cultivation of Mind, in how we pretend that any institution can "speak one's inner perception"—to the diffusion of books and their social benefits among a population. In James's offhand observation, we see a distinction about the value of collecting books, one best encapsulated by the difference between "knowledge" and "information." If librarians in the nineteenth century believed in the moral hierarchies and universal value of books that contribute to "knowledge," they would by the twentieth century prefer to speak in a value-neutral fashion about "information" as a resource, like water or electricity. The concept of information implies technological problems of quantity and distribution, rather than epistemological and hermeneutic problems of discerning God's design, for instance, or preserving scientific and moral truths for future generations. Between minding and not minding the presence of children and immigrants as they overran the archive, then, lies a perennial conflict between elitist and democratic arguments about whether the circulation of texts multiplies the social welfare or erodes the quality of culture. Where does the moral authority of a text lie: in the "good" that follows from the individual's apprehension of elusive but uplifting ideas (from which the social world can only be a distraction), or the "goods" that flow from management of commodities across ever larger populations and territories? As texts cease to be quasi-sacral objects, linking readers to a seemingly timeless realm of Mind, do they become just another form of currency, an increasingly antiquated "medium" of traffic on the information superhighway?

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[45] Promey, *Painting Religion in Public,* 147.

[46] Carl Ackerman, "The Bookworms of New York: How the Public Libraries Satisfy the Immigrant's Thirst for Knowledge," *The Independent,* 23 January 1913, 199, 201.

Religions promote their social power by fostering the moral authority of the written word, honoring certain texts and particular ways of engaging those texts as testaments to truth, spirit, tradition, or history. The "modern education" that public libraries helped to bring about entailed not only the creation of new physical and social contexts for reading—as a mode of self-directed leisure, linked to the reform of public space and the circulation of new forms of social identity—but a change in the attitudes that citizens of liberal societies assume toward the material forms and practical utility of knowledge. For the professional librarians and reformers who so often assumed a "missionary" tone as "apostles of culture," the modern library would institutionalize a new scripturalism, in which the material forms of reading were altered so as to cultivate public faith in secular ideals of individual and collective progress. The "highest and best influence of the library," as William I. Fletcher observed in *Public Libraries in America* (1899), "may be summed up in the single word culture, although abuse has perverted the idea into something like cant. No word so well describes the influence of the diffusion of good reading among the people in giving tone and character to their intellectual life." What made reading good, and retrieved the concept of culture from the tendentious abstractions of cant, were its practical effects in "counteracting the attractions of saloons and low resorts of all types," and awakening "a dormant fondness for reading and culture" among boys and young men in particular who lacked "home and school opportunities." As Fletcher suggests, it was the taste for reading as an activity, and not the value we impute to particular books, that we should count as culture: not objects, preciously guarded in museums, in collections, or in the expertise of learned professionals, but the processes of social evolution by which a people's "intellectual life" acquires "tone and character." Echoing advocates of educational reform like Matthew Arnold, or social scientists like Jevons or G. Stanley Hall, library professionals understood culture as a hierarchical, progressive movement of "a people" from barbarism to civilization.

But can the act of reading offer the "highest and best influence" we call culture regardless of the content of reading? Especially striking in Fletcher's formulation is the proposition that social groups can have an aggregate "intellectual life" which, as Bridgehampton's minister and judge no less than Henry James recognized in their defenses of an "old order," must inevitably challenge traditional forms of moral authority.

> While books, even good books, are not always entitled to be called means of grace, whoever will look candidly at the matter will clearly see that only narrow and dwarfed ideas on spiritual subjects and a distorted form of religious life can consist with poverty of resources in mind and intellect. None are more impressed with the need of culture to lay a basis for large, tolerant, and truly Christian views and practices than those who endeavor to show the meagre and stunted intellects of the masses the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Not that their salvation is to begin with culture, but in order that religion may be all that it should, the enlargement and development of the higher human faculties obviously should precede.[47]

Despite his qualifications, Fletcher was arguing that the "means" of reading *was* grace: that salvation lay in liberation of the "meagre and stunted intellects of the masses" from "narrow and dwarfed ideas on spiritual subjects." Once separated from particular doctrines and the literal authority of scripture, however, the "enlargement and development of the higher human faculties" became its own faith, a process of reflection and judgment that might as easily lead away from *a priori* certainties of "the Way, the Truth, and the Life"—toward spiritual and aesthetic pluralism, many ways of cultivating the "tone and character" of one's own life—rather than to that of any savior. In this way do mechanisms of circulation and communication that bring otherwise distant people close de-center the prescriptive authority not only of the church but of literal modes of reading, attachments to particular words, on which it depends. To read in liberal culture is to enter networks of meaning, many paths to multiple truths.

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[47] William Isaac Fletcher, *Public Libraries in America*, 2d ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1899), 38.

The fate of social and public libraries alike in the nineteenth century depended entirely on their willingness and capacity to multiply their traffic in books. And in no aspect of their collection or circulation policies did libraries do more to liberate nineteenth-century concepts and institutions of culture from paternalistic "cant" than in the mass circulation of fiction.[48] As they obsessively tabulated statistics on circulation, the annual reports of these institutions consistently found that patrons borrowed novels more than any other kind of reading, and did so at a rate that far exceeded the percentage of fiction held by collections. In its statistics of circulation of twenty-four public libraries in 1874–75, for example, the 1876 *Special Report* documented that in libraries ranging from California to Ohio to Virginia, "English prose and fiction, and juvenile" constituted more than half of the works in circulation for all of the libraries, and more than 70 percent at twelve of the libraries. So too, well before its move to new quarters, at least 70 percent of the works that circulated from the Boston Public Library's "Lower" Hall were "prose fiction for adults and youths."[49] At the turn of the century, writers and speakers often asserted that two-thirds of the circulation of public libraries could be attributed to "juvenile fiction and fiction."[50]

The public library's accommodation of the novel was made possible by the expansion and diversification of the print marketplace. Fletcher argued in an early piece in the *Nation* that when read within the broader context of the print market, library statistics showed that readers preferred to borrow rather than buy fiction: "Many families buy and read historical, religious and other standard literature and send to the library for fiction." The gradual emergence of dense networks of literacy—through the domestication of literary practices, the expansion of non-classical literary curricula in secondary and higher education, and the proliferation of agencies of "middlebrow" taste in the print market—helped to insulate and guide readers from the "pernicious" and "promiscuous" tendencies of "blood and thunder" tales or "sensation" fiction that they could obtain, without adult supervision, in the penny press or Beadle's dime libraries.[51] Through the scribbled notations on catalogue cards, guides to "home-reading," personal assistance to patrons, programs with schools, and myriad other schemes, public librarians actively sought to shape the tastes of their patrons. Both commercial circulating libraries and public libraries contributed to the emergence of modern aesthetic values for judging the moral influence of fiction. As Robert Snape points out, the fiction question was concerned not with whether novels should be provided in public libraries, but "with the distinctions between different types of novels, and with literary merit and moral standards."[52] As Justin Winsor, the superintendent of the Boston Public, wrote in the 1876 *Special Report,* "Libraries do not do their whole duty unless they strive to elevate the taste of their readers, and this they can do, not by refusing to put within their reach the books which the masses of readers want, but by inducing a habit of frequenting the library, by giving them such books as they ask for and then helping them in the choice of books," and "conducting them" to higher forms of literature. "Multitudes of readers need only to be put in this path to follow it."[53]

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[48] On changing attitudes toward fiction among librarians, see Garrison, *Apostles of Culture;* and Garrison, "Immoral Fiction in the Late Victorian Library," in *Victorian America,* ed. Daniel Walker Howe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976). Also see Esther Jane Carrier, *Fiction in Public Libraries, 1876–1900* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1965), and Carrier, *Fiction in Public Libraries, 1900–1950* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1985).

[49] "Library Reports and Statistics," Bureau of Education, *Public Libraries in the United States of America: Their History, Condition, and Management, Part I* (Washington: GPO, 1876), 820–21.

[50] James Angell, "The Use of the Public Library," in Bostwick, *The Library and Society,* 429.

By both appealing to and directing the habit of reading for leisure, public libraries helped to legitimize fiction as a medium of "modern education." William Poole pointed out at the 1876 conference of librarians that the "great mass of readers prefer to take their knowledge" from fiction, which treats actual events and lives, natural laws and physical phenomena, and "other subjects, mental, moral, sentimental and divine."[54] As they defended circulation policies, librarians argued that fiction did not have to overturn the role of religion and morality, as the elites of Bridgehampton had feared, but could give them forms of expression and authority more suited to a new democratic order. The Apprentices' Library of Philadelphia, for example, noted in its 1871 report that "works of fiction that portray well-drawn characters, the virtues that constitute a pure and upright life, convey to the reader eternal truths" that "can be more effectually taught by example than by precept." By fostering identification with the realistic example of fictive persons and situations, the "better class of novels" avoided what its 1880 report called the "injurious tendency" of fiction to give "absurdly unreal views of life" and to "promote a love of excitement and adventure and discontent with regular habits of industry."[55] Even when, like so many early leaders of the library profession, Fletcher held his nose at what the public wanted, he argued that their desire for fiction was natural, a "craving for that romance in literature which is missed from life" that the public library was obligated to meet, lest the public seek satisfaction in less "wholesome and ennobling" channels of amusement. "To the masses of the people, hard-worked and living humdrum lives, as well as to those lapped in luxury and pining for something to kill time, the novel comes as an open door into an ideal life, in the enjoyment of which, even in fancy, one may forget the hardships or the tedium of real life."[56]

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[51] For a description of this literary landscape and an analysis of its relation to development of middle-class character, see Augst, *The Clerk's Tale.*

[52] Robert Snape, *Leisure and the Rise of the Public Library* (London: Library Association, 1995), 30.

[53] Justin Winsor, "Reading in Popular Libraries," in Bureau of Education, *Public Libraries in the United States of America,* 432. On freedom of reading and censorship, see Geller, *Forbidden Books.*

[54] Cited in Fletcher, *Public Libraries in America,* 34.

The mass circulation of fiction in public libraries helped both to standardize and to personalize the very concept of morality, substituting psychological norms of individual development for prescriptive virtues and vices that had previously governed traditional moral and religious training. The new social sciences in the late nineteenth century and the marginalization of theology in the university helped to rationalize morality itself as a process of organic growth. As one sociologist observed in 1908, "Virtue no longer consists of literal obedience to arbitrary standards set by community or church but rather in conduct consistent with a growing personality."[57] One might argue, though, that this version of "growing personality" was itself modeled on the narrative and representational strategies that made the popularity of the novel, as Ian Watt pointed out some time ago, coincident with the emergence of Western individualism. As a genre, of course, the novel evolved in ways designed to appeal to the imagination—a concept that, as it was shaped by faculty psychology and romantic aesthetics, increasingly emphasized the subjective nature of reading. Learning to see characters as "round" rather than "flat," as persons rather than types, readers also came to understand identity itself in distinctively "modern" terms that mirrored the autonomy and ambiguity of their choices and actions.[58] Achieving unprecedented popularity as a medium of entertainment, novels made available to mass audiences the personal histories and emotional depths of individuals.[59]

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[55] Lewis, *History of the Apprentices' Library of Philadelphia*, 64.

[56] Fletcher, *Public Libraries in America*, 31–32.

[57] Cited in David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 68.

In large part through the mass circulation of fiction, then, public libraries multiplied the paths away from the literal Truth of traditional moral or religious instruction, in ways that allowed ordinary readers to interpret universal truths from the examples of real life—whether actual or imagined, a character's or one's own. Mary Antin never mentions what she read, but *The Promised Land* in effect transforms her life into a fiction, reimagining an immigrant's story as a distinctively American romance of self-discovery. "I was born, I lived, I was made over," Antin declares in the preface. "I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading. I can analyze my subject, I can reveal everything; for she, and not I, is my real heroine" (xix). Antin recalls walking through the library's courtyard daydreaming that she was "a Greek of the classic days," finding that there, "everything I read in school . . . was real to me," and casting herself as the protagonist of a "romance more thrilling than poet ever sung" (342, 343). In both her teenage reading and her adult writing, then, Antin applied to her actual life the power of fiction that James Angell, president of the University of Michigan, had praised in 1904, to "give us vivid pictures of life" and "a reality to history."[60] In this sense, *The Promised Land* itself exemplifies the influence of popular novels to encourage "the prevailing infirmity of our time which seems to substitute sensibility for morality," as Josiah Quincy lamented in his comments about the effects of free libraries (1875).[61] In Antin's hands, as with so many romancers of the public library throughout the twentieth century, a literary sensibility of the utility of imagination—that "distinctively modern faculty" which Colin Campbell defines as "the ability to create an illusion which is known to be false but felt to be true"—itself furnishes American self-making its secular morality.[62] A few contemporary reviewers detected in Antin's story what the *Yale Review* called a "programme of the extreme individualist" that often veered into what the *Hebrew American* described as "an orgy of egotism," setting, as Oscar Handlin notes, "the goal of self-expression as the supreme good."[63] But then, it is precisely the essentially romantic devotion to self-expression and the quasi-spiritual search for self-fulfillment that, with the onset of the consumer revolution of the late eighteenth century, made individualism the creed of a modern middle class.[64]

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[58] On the genre of the novel and individualism, see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Fielding, and Richardson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957). On the representation of character in novels and its relation to new forms of interiority fostered by the growth of consumer culture, see Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). On the uncertainty of identity in market culture, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[59] On the permutations of liberal individualism in relation to American literature, see Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), and Cyrus R. K. Patell, *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

[60] Angell, "The Use of the Public Library," in Bostwick, *The Library and Society,* 429.

[61] Josiah Quincy, *Protection of Majorities and Other Essays* (Boston, 1875), excerpted in Bostwick, *The Library and Society,* 59.

Making transcendent goods of citizenship feel true for herself, Antin bears spiritual witness to the practical power of imagination to individualize and personalize the realities of immigrant life. Blurring first and third person, Antin's autobiography offers itself as a scripture to the civil religion. In *They Who Knock at Our Gates: A Complete Gospel of Immigration* (1914), Antin argued that prejudice against immigrants represented a heresy against the "Gospel of liberty," the "holy order" of citizenship, that sustained its sacred truth through typological imagination that identifies not only present immigrants with the past pilgrims, but also native self with foreign others.[65] "Go from the public school to the public library, from the library to the social settlement, and you will carry away the same story in a hundred different forms," Antin observes, because each story enacts the same "American confession of faith," a "recital of the doctrines of liberty and equality" (47, 6). Whether written down and added to the voluminous canon of American immigrant literature, or merely seen by sympathetic librarians and teachers, the vivid and various *stories* of immigrant experience can, as did the four gospels of the New Testament, awaken an evangelical "sensibility" of "our faith as Americans." During political campaigns for immigrant restriction in the 1910s, that sensibility had been dulled by "commissions and committees," perverted by "experts and statisticians"(9), or prejudiced by "tyranny of phrases," catchwords, stereotypes, slurs, and slogans (34). Read as the founding law of "our national gospel" rather than a "a bombastic political manifesto" excusing a "gigantic land-grab"(27), Antin declares, "the Declaration of Independence, like the Ten Commandments, must be taken literally and applied universally"(14).

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[62] Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 78: "The individual is both actor and audience in his own drama, 'his own' in the sense that he constructed it, stars in it, and constitutes the sum total of the audience." Antin's memoir in general repeatedly emphasizes the subjective nature of memory and the role of daydreaming and romance in her recollections.

[63] Cited in Werner Sollars, "Introduction," *The Promised Land* (New York: Penguin), xxxii; Handlin, "Introduction," *The Promised Land* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), xii.

[64] As Campbell argues, the emergence and veneration of the imagination were crucial to romanticism and the development of the hedonistic ethics of modern consumer culture more generally. As it was propagated through novel reading and urban bohemianism, "romanticism provided that philosophy of 'recreation' necessary for a dynamic consumerism: a philosophy which legitimates the search for pleasure as good in itself and not merely of value because it restores the individual to an optimum efficiency." Campbell argues that romanticism inspired the modern "philosophy of self-expression and self-realization most commonly attributed to Freud," and that provided "ethical support for that restless and continuous pattern of consumption" (201). For an anthology of comments on public libraries by American writers, see Susan Allen Toth and John Coughlan, *Reading Rooms* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1991).

[65] Mary Antin, *They Who Knock at Our Gates: A Complete Gospel of Immigration* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 11, 27. Further references to this work are indicated in the text.

Antin applies the literal creeds inscribed on the library by making it the literary stage for her self-realization. On its steps and inside its walls, the heroine finds her true identity, that true self "made over" by the common spiritual inheritance embodied in reading that is "Free To All." At the very end of her memoir, sitting on the steps of the Boston Public, Antin writes:

> I am not tied to the monumental past, any more than my feet were bound to my grandfather's house. . . . The little house in Polotzk, once my home, has now become a toy of memory, as I move about at will in the wide spaces of this splendid palace, whose shadow covers acres. No! It is not I that belong to the past, but the past that belongs to me. . . . Into my hands is given all [of America's] priceless heritage, to the last white star espied through the telescope, to the last great thought of the philosopher. (364)

Antin's emancipation represents, finally, a freedom from history—from the facts about one's origins that otherwise bind us to the "monumental past." At a monument to public culture, knowledge of the universe and America's heritage alike become a personal possession, "given" into an immigrant's hands. At the public library, Antin has gained license to "move about at will" in the public space of memory, to rewrite history as her own story, in a way emblematic of liberalism: "I don't belong to the past, but the past belongs to me." And indeed, as *The Promised Land* became a major bestseller, Antin's own story became, if only for a short time, a widely circulated gospel for the civil religion; The *New York Sun* reported that Antin's name led all "the books most called-for at the various libraries."[66] In 1928, selections from it were published separately in the Riverside Literature Series, which suggested that one theme for written class-work be "Mary Antin's Faith in America."[67]

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[66] Cited in Sollars, "Introduction," *Promised Land,* xxxii.

[67] *At School in the Promised Land or the Story of a Little Immigrant* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), vi.

Used as a text for civics classes as late as 1949, *The Promised Land* offered students and would-be citizens personalized revelation of the cosmic power of education to "open doors" to possible futures and potential lives.

IN HIS MEMOIR *Men and Women* (1888), Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who had himself served as a director of railway and telegraph companies, turned, like William Frederick Poole and Henry James, to the metaphors of networks, systems, and machinery to explain the free library's role in the advance of modernity: "The simple truth is that the creation of a system of such libraries is like the creation of great railway system; it must be an evolution, not a creation outright." Precisely because no one can "now foresee what fifty years of development will do," the "essential thing in managing libraries . . . is to have faith in the community in which one lives" by welcoming an unknown future, embracing hope in progress.[68] Mary Antin sought to make her own story a personal testament to this faith, to defeat fear of social change by writing a spiritual autobiography of an immigrant's conversion to the civil religion of democracy. As they used the new infrastructure of public culture to achieve their own social mobility and self-advancement, she argued, immigrants would vindicate not only the institutions and laws of liberal governance, but the trust in individual freedom that constituted the secular gospel of modernity.

In our own time, the role of religion in public life has assumed new prominence in political debates, and tax support for public goods such as education and transportation, first built in the Progressive Era, has come under attack. Yet a 1996 poll found that the "American public agrees wholeheartedly with the library leaders" that an impressive physical space "is part of the library's identity." That millions of dollars continue to be spent on the erection of library buildings in cities such as Seattle and Minneapolis, and that millions are spent to expand and renovate marble and limestone monuments like the Boston Public Library, suggests that libraries "may occupy an almost sacred place in the American community psyche," even as the Internet and home computer have assumed many of their functions in the dissemination of information.[69] While their aesthetics are more modern or postmodern than ecclesiastical, these civic buildings suggest that one of the primary social functions of the public library remains symbolic: the staging of freedom in the local, often mundane struggle of individuals to craft a meaningful identity for themselves amidst routine paths and standard choices of mass society. Although scholars have for some time been concerned with interpreting the ideological meanings that lie beneath the norms inscribed on the walls and mission statements of cultural institutions, Mary Antin's narrative reminds us that reading in liberal society can be a moral devotion, characterized by values of literalism, sincerity, and idealism. However banal they perhaps have become to professional (and typically secular) critics of American modernity, the seeming "truths" of the liberal creed—"Free to All"—are newly revealed to individuals as they walk up a staircase, select one book rather than another, sit in a reading room, or find a dignified space for repose and reflection.

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[68] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Men and Women* (New York, 1888), excerpted in Bostwick, *The Library and Society,* 65, 66.

[69] Laura Weiss, *Buildings, Books, and Bytes: Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age* (Washington, DC: Benton Foundation, 1996), 26, 15. The attachment to buildings was viewed by 65 percent of respondents as a high priority, third after hours and programs for children and purchasing new public library books; 84 percent of African Americans thought it important for libraries to spend money in this way.

In the early twentieth century, the personal histories of immigrants and children like Mary Antin helped to create faith in the public library as an engine of middle-class formation, and in liberalism more generally as the path to modern progress. In representing the seemingly organic growth of children and the immigrant's special capacity for physical and social mobility, *The Promised Land* argued that the library and other institutions of public culture "made" Americans by fostering the individual's universal and innate drive for adaptation and evolution—for self-making that might continually redeem a fallen society from its own realities.