

Three

“An Ecstasy of Apprehension”: The Erotics of Domination in *The Wide, Wide World*

“THOUGH we *must* sorrow, we must not rebel,” Ellen Montgomery’s mother admonishes in the opening of *The Wide, Wide World* (12). How does one come to terms with the inevitability of suffering and the prohibition of resistance? Mrs. Montgomery has the answer: “Remember, dear Ellen, God sends no trouble upon his children but in love” (12). If Ellen can learn to interpret suffering as a sign of God’s love, then her suffering will be not only meaningful but rewarding. As it turns out, these precepts of providential Calvinism actually do determine Ellen’s experiences of suffering. When Ellen’s mother dies, Ellen’s “brother” John takes up where she left off, reminding Ellen that “God loves every sinner . . . never better than when he sends bitter trouble on them” (349).

Ellen listened, with her face hid on his shoulder.

“Do you love Christ, Ellen?”

She nodded, weeping afresh.

“Do you love him less since he has brought you into this great sorrow?”

“No,” sobbed Ellen;—“*more.*” (349)

The predominant discourses of her upbringing make Ellen feel love for the one who afflicts her.

Richard Brodhead implies as much in his influential article “Sparing the Rod.” He demonstrates that Ellen is raised under the precepts of a “disciplinary intimacy” that intertwines love and coercion, and she therefore seeks love in the form of discipline and chastisement. “Made into a compulsive love seeker, Ellen shows how the child so determined becomes driven, by her heightened need to win and keep parental favor, not just to accept but really to *seek out* the authority of the parent’s moral imperatives” (82, emphasis in original). Brodhead magnificently demonstrates that in *The Wide, Wide World*, modern forms of power “replace the old disciplinary mode with new technologies—less visible but more pervasive, less ‘cruel’ but more deeply controlling” (69). Yet he fails to address the more perverse implications of this argument: disciplinary intimacy can be erotic as well as affectionate, creating what Fou-

cault calls sensual, “*perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*” between the disciplinarian and the subject (*History* 45, emphasis in original). As Foucault argues, the discourses constructing an individual’s subjectivity play a role in shaping this sexualized response to authority.

In this chapter, I propose that Ellen’s association of love with chastisement becomes eroticized through the twin discourses of providential Calvinism and true womanhood. True womanhood makes the most basic experiences of the body so problematic for Ellen that pain seems alluring, simply because it affords the basic experience of embodiment. Calvinism, on the other hand, provides a language in which pain is associated with divine love. John Humphreys, consistently associated with God, is in a prime position to benefit from this association of physical pain with divine love. Though, as Brodhead points out, Ellen appreciates John’s nurturing, maternal qualities, she is, I propose, excited by his qualities of paternal violence—manifested in his horsewhipping, his authoritative, invasive gaze, and his many associations with a punitive God. Her attraction to his acts of domination is not purely that of a disciplinary subject for its mother; it is erotic.

In arguing that Ellen is masochistic, my argument would at first appear to be at odds with a great deal of recent criticism of books like *The Wide, Wide World*.¹ Nina Baym, for example, explicitly states that *The Wide, Wide World* is not masochistic since Warner never makes drudgery look attractive. Seemingly masochistic behavior such as Ellen’s, she claims, should be recognized as “a moderate, or limited, or pragmatic feminism” (*Woman* 18). Numerous subsequent critical analyses have followed through on Baym’s notion of a “pragmatic feminism,” demonstrating ways that apparently masochistic behaviors in antebellum domestic fiction are comprehensible, functional, or even subversive. But the fact that such behaviors have practical motives and outcomes does not render them less masochistic. Masochists frequently take pleasure in precisely the emotional and practical benefits that these critics spotlight—a functional identity, decreased vulnerability to abuse, self-expression, and social empowerment—but they are people whose environments encourage them to see suffering, submission, and abjection as their best means of filling those needs, and who therefore associate suffering with pleasure.² One of the stunning features of *The Wide, Wide World* is that it makes its psychological universe so real that readers can easily recognize the cultural and discursive factors that make suffering a form of pleasure and power. We can *see* how suffering functions as a subversive, strategic, comforting, “limited or pragmatic feminism” for Ellen, licensing expressions of anger, constructing a related and functional identity, and producing a sense of intimacy, fulfillment, and purpose.

Indeed, even sexual masochism can be seen as a perverse but effective form of “moderate feminism” in *The Wide, Wide World*. In a culture in which womanhood is constructed through abjection of the female body, feeling pain is paradoxically a counterhegemonic activity; fantasies (as opposed to real suffering) are particularly ripe for such pleasures, since they express a desire for physical sensation without actually producing pain. Such fantasies, articulated in the voice of Calvinist sentimentalism, can function as expressions of a taboo desire for erotic pleasure.³ In making available to antebellum authors a volatile and transgressive idiom of desire, sentimental masochism turns one of the greatest weapons of the patriarchy—the eroticization of domination—into a form of pleasure and agency.

Clearly, though, the erotics of domination is double-edged. Such tropes only enjoy expressive force because “true women’s” desires and identities are deformed by patriarchal ideology: Ellen actually embraces the chastening rod that oppresses her because her desire has been influenced in such a way that she finds its blows exciting. While it is true that she asserts her will and desire in the closing pages of the book, her “will” is an oppressive longing to be absorbed into others and to be free of will. As Walter Benn Michaels has shown, it is perverse to celebrate all forms of freedom—when such a celebration includes the “freedom” of individuals to relinquish all of their rights or actually to give themselves to another person, such as a sadist or a tyrant. Such a celebration exemplifies the limitations of a “liberal” devotion to pure freedom.⁴ If we are inclined to celebrate Ellen’s choice to indulge her desire for domination as an expression of her individuality, we must recognize that her individuality itself may be repressive. Moreover, one young fan indicates a potentially disturbing legacy of *The Wide, Wide World* when she writes to Susan Warner, “How I loved little Ellen Montgomery. How I sympathized with her in all her troubles. How I like Mr. Van Brunt for being so kind to her, and wished I had a John as she had.”⁵ This young reader disturbingly suggests that while she and readers like her liked Mr. Van Brunt for his kindness, they *desired* John. Warner’s portrayal of eroticized domination is double-edged; it negotiates oppressive cultural gender norms, but it also risks disseminating them among millions of readers, imparting to men a suspicion that women desire domination, and to women a belief that domination should be their own true desire.

The Making of a Masochist

As *The Wide, Wide World* reveals, one of the principal reasons that suffering and pain can appeal to the antebellum bourgeois woman is that it provides access to the body, an access that ideologies of true woman-

hood and Calvinism render otherwise problematic for women. The book endorses the bourgeois ideal of bodiless true womanhood, focusing upon the pleasures enjoyed by the woman who achieves that elevated but elusive state. Alice Humphreys is a “true woman.” As we have seen, she is like a “transparent glazing . . . unknown it was she gave life and harmony to the whole” (205). In renouncing her status as a potentially self-fulfilling individual, becoming unknown and invisible, such a woman becomes the essential ingredient in everything, privileged to enjoy both self-esteem and widespread admiration. *The Wide, Wide World* demonstrates how abjection of the body is a central process in the construction of sentimental true womanhood. Once Ellen achieves the noncorporeal ideal, her education is complete, but so is her story; only in the last few pages of the book do we feel that she has completely subjugated her corporeal self. The final sentence points toward what Warner represents as an idyllic future, in which Ellen leaves Scotland and goes “back to spend her life with the friends and guardians she best loved, and to be to them . . . ‘the light of the eyes.’” Her education complete, Ellen has achieved the paradoxical properties of light: she is visible but insubstantial. She will “be to them,” her identity contingent upon others whose vision she can enhance and whose being she can augment. Standing in ironic counterpoint to Emerson’s transparent eyeball, the true woman illuminates the vision of others, exists solely through enhancing others’ lives.

For the girl who wants to be insubstantial, like “light,” the fact of her own embodiment is threatening. In keeping with her Calvinist background, Warner posits the human body as unreliable at best. In the opening pages of the book, Ellen tells her mother, “Why, mamma,—in the first place I trust every word you say—entirely—I know nothing could be truer; if you were to tell me black is white, mamma, I should think my eyes had been mistaken. Then everything you tell or advise me to do, I know it is right, perfectly. And I always feel safe when you are near me, because I know you’ll take care of me. And I am glad to think . . . I needn’t manage myself, because I know I can’t; and if I could, I’d rather you would, mamma” (18). Given Ellen’s inability to trust her own senses, it is not surprising that she feels unable to take care of herself—if her most fundamental physical experiences are unreliable, how can she have any basis for making decisions at all?⁶ Her suspicion of her own senses and judgment leads even further: even if Ellen *could* take care of herself, she would *rather* be taken care of. Granted, Ellen is only a child here, but her words exemplify a pattern of female dependence that resembles the ideal of the feme-covert, both in its advocacy of female subordination to male subjectivity and in its implication that a woman cannot trust her own body and its sensory input. Even when she has grown up, she fantasizes about John’s doing her thinking for her; at

the end of the book, we find her deciding how to handle a particular situation not by determining what seems best to her but rather by thinking, "I know what [John] would tell me if he was here, and I'll try to do it" (519). It is indeed true that Warner values female intellectual development; as Lora Romero and Nancy Armstrong point out, domestic ideology arose in reaction against the upper-class commodification of women as purely ornamental objects, and Warner's middle-class domesticity represents women as intelligent creatures with minds hungering for historical, literary, scientific, and theological learning. Nonetheless, Ellen's intellectual training consistently stresses not independent thinking but mimicry of the thoughts of her superiors. Even in adulthood, she requires others to tell her the meaning of her knowledge.

When Ellen insists that she would rather *not* take care of herself, she affirms not only the basic principles of coverture but also the basic principles of Calvinism: "it is just so; it is *just* so: that I wish you to trust in God," Mrs. Montgomery replies (18). Ellen's inability to trust the data afforded by her senses accords with the Puritan notion of the depravity of the senses, which views the information the senses provide as potentially useful if interpreted by reason, but likely to foster a false sense of self-reliance that will lead one away from an appropriate dependence upon God. This basic Puritan (antisentimental) suspicion about the body as a source of knowledge is vividly reinforced in one episode occurring roughly halfway through the novel, when Ellen is wandering around a greenhouse, indulging her passion for flowers. "From the moment the sweet aromatic smell of the plants had greeted her she had been in a high state of delight. . . . She could hardly leave a superb cactus, in the petals of which there was such a singular blending of scarlet and crimson as almost to dazzle her sight; and if the pleasure of smell could intoxicate she would have *reeled* away from a luxuriant daphne odorata in full flower, over which she feasted for a long time" (324, emphasis in original). Left to interpret material phenomena on her own, Ellens tends toward a dangerous sensuality; she is "intoxicated" by a floral "feast." The description of the encounter emphasizes the voluptuous enticement of the carnal world, which Warner characterizes with words like "delight," "dazzled," "pleasure," "reeled away," and "luxuriant." It also indicates the dangers of such carnal experiences: Ellen is a slave to these scarlet and crimson pleasures, so "high" and "reel[ing]" that she can "hardly leave."

This experience in the greenhouse affords an important object lesson in basic Puritan doctrine for Ellen: while God sends physical pleasures, such as flowers, as emblems of the better world to come, it is dangerously easy for the would-be Christian to focus upon these signs rather than on the things they represent. Ellen is so intoxicated by the signifier

that she fails to turn her mind to the signified. When John joins her as she admires a white camellia and asks, “What does that flower make you think of, Ellen?” she cannot answer. “‘I don’t know,’ said Ellen,—‘I couldn’t think of any thing but itself’” (324). Ellen does not know how to “think” about a flower, which she sees as only “itself.” Calvinism suggests that this is precisely the problem with sensory data derived from the material world; they may lead to a damnably carnal fixation upon things themselves—what Harriet Newell called “the glittering toys of the world”—instead of on an appropriate, spiritual attraction to their essential, higher beauty. John, however, models the appropriate response to the flower: “‘It reminds me of what I ought to be—and of what I shall be if I ever see heaven; it seems to me the emblem of a sinless pure spirit,—looking up in fearless spotlessness. Do you remember what was said to the old Church of Sardis?—‘Thou hast a few names that have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.’” The tears rushed to Ellen’s eyes, she felt she was so very unlike this” (324–25). Ellen had just been reveling in the cactus flower’s dazzlingly scarlet and crimson petals, so it is not surprising that she feels her garments are not white; she is dangerously inclined to defile them, for she has not yet learned how to avoid the snares of the material realm through a spiritualized hermeneutic that ignores the materiality of a thing itself and refers everything to a spiritual meaning. “How much you see in every thing, that I do not see at all,” she tells John more than once (481). Such experiences teach Ellen to beware of her own body; its sensations must be received cautiously and interpreted carefully—according to principles dictated by someone else.⁷

Of course, suspicion of the senses is fundamental to the Christian tradition, but such a suspicion is particularly important for women invested in the ideology of true womanhood, which places a high value on woman’s religiosity, purity, and ethereality. True womanhood frequently seems to suggest that a woman’s role is to embody purity, to avoid all situations in which physical experiences might challenge her religious principles. Men must confront the evils of life, while for a woman, as Alice puts it: “when [evil] is forced upon you, see as little of it as you can, and forget as soon as you can what you see” (184). For a woman, a good way to avoid contact with corrosive materiality is to perform tasks that are clean and relatively immobilizing, such as sewing invisible seams, embroidering dainty objects like eyeglass cases and collars, making perfect tea and toast, and drawing copies of others’ artwork.

This is not to say that all women’s work is simply ornamental in the novel. After all, Aunt Fortune is a productive landowner who churns, spins, preserves food, washes, and runs a farm. And the “bee” scenes foreground the emotionally fulfilling and useful aspects of female labor.

Indeed, from such a perspective, *The Wide, Wide World* could be seen as a celebration of women's productivity. But while Warner does represent the value of working-class women's labor, her primary emphasis is upon the *higher* meaning enjoyed by middle-class women who attain the status of true womanhood. Again, it might be objected that even Alice—the incarnation of true womanhood—performs the important labor of sewing, leading prayer sessions, and cooking. But although Warner celebrates that labor, there's a curiously unlabored air about it as Warner describes it. The Humphreys' two-kitchen system provides an apt metaphor for the clean, pure labor of a true woman. In describing her kitchen, Alice tells Ellen: "I have been in many a parlour that I do not like as well. Beyond this is a lower kitchen where Margery [the servant] does all her rough work; nothing comes up the steps that lead from that to this but the very nicest and daintiest of kitchen matters" (167). Generally parlors are "for show," and in her parlor-kitchen, Alice engages in relatively decorative work, the "daintiest of kitchen matters," while the "rough" work is performed by servants like Margery or working-class women like Aunt Fortune, who "cruelly" dyes Ellen's dainty white stockings an easy-to-wash gray. In her parlor-kitchen, Alice incarnates an industrious purity; though she does roll up her sleeves, asking, "Did you think cakes were made without hands?" hers come in contact only with substances preselected in order to keep her untainted.

Underlying the bourgeois ideals of noncorporeality and laborless labor in the novel is the ideal of passionlessness. At the beginning of the book, Warner writes that Ellen's "passions were by nature very strong, and by education very imperfectly controlled; and time, 'that rider that breaks youth,' had not as yet tried his hand upon her" (11). The novel insists that the passions are *the* problem, both physically and spiritually. Early in the novel, Dr. Green tells Ellen that the one thing she can do to help her mother is make perfect toast, warning that she "must be very careful—if that piece of toast of yours should chance to get burned, one of these fine evenings, I won't answer for the consequences" (19). Such a warning is presumably a friendly effort to afford the little girl a sense of agency in the face of agonizing loss. But just five pages earlier, Ellen had burned a piece of toast in a fit of passion: "she began to think . . . the sickness of heart quite overcame her; she could not go on. Toast and fork and all dropped from her hand into the ashes; and . . . she burst into a fit of sorrow" (14). The effect of the doctor's warning that burnt toast could lead to illness, following so close upon the heels of Ellen's "fit" is to imply that Ellen's passion is partly responsible for her mother's illness. Indeed, the doctor observes, "I'm afraid you haven't taken proper care of her; she looks to me as if she had been too much excited. I've a notion she has been secretly taking half a bottle of wine, or read-

ing some furious kind of a novel . . . she *must not* be excited,—you must take care that she is not,—it isn’t good for her. You mustn’t let her talk much, or laugh much, or cry at all, on any account” (19). Dr. Green offers the little girl possibilities for meaningful work, but those possibilities only involve perfect self-control, and the stakes for failure are high (he cannot “answer for the consequences”). This is indeed a double-edged sense of agency: Ellen can do next to nothing; the only thing she can actually do is try to help her mother not feel by concentrating upon having no feelings herself.

A sense of power and meaning contingent upon perfectly controlling the body and its feelings is an invitation for masochism, because perfect self-control is impossible, as the always-already-burnt-toast incident suggests. It creates a built-in sense of guilt, for Ellen has few avenues of agency *apart* from self-control open to her, leaving her prone to fear of a mistake. But she has abundant motives for being deeply invested in *trying* to achieve perfect self-control. In fact, that is her major ongoing effort throughout the book. Because Ellen is committed to controlling herself and preventing any spontaneous eruptions of passion, she feels a strong attraction to people who are willing to offer assistance with the task of self-discipline, while people who indulge her are doing her no favor. Dr. Green, for example, is the object of Warner’s admiration and affection precisely because he advocates self-restraint and goes so far as to lie to the Montgomery women in his effort to help them discipline themselves. He asks Ellen:

“[W]hat do you think of this fine scheme of mine . . . of sending this sick lady over the water to get well? . . . ”

“*Will* it make her quite well, do you think, sir?” asked Ellen, earnestly.

“‘Will it make her well!’ to be sure it will; do you think I don’t know better than to send people all the way across the ocean for nothing? Who do you think would want Dr. Green, if he sent people on wild-goose chases in that fashion?” . . .

“Poor woman!” said the doctor to himself as he went downstairs (he was a humane man). “I wonder if she’ll live till she gets to the other side!” (19)

So why *does* the doctor send Mrs. Montgomery all the way across the ocean for nothing, on a wild-goose chase, which he himself states would be inappropriate? Why not let her stay and die at home? And—an even more interesting question—why does Warner parenthetically comment that “he was a humane man,” going out of her way to praise the kindness of someone who deliberately misleads Ellen?

In a sense, Dr. Green is “humane” simply because, unlike Captain Montgomery, he sympathizes with suffering women. But there is also, in the world of *The Wide, Wide World*, something admirable in the doc-

tor's misleading words and actions, which manipulate Ellen's emotions in such a way as to prevent a useless experience of violent passion. Evidently, she is not to feel what is actually happening to her, presumably because passion is bad for her. Like Captain Montgomery, Dr. Green wants the parting of mother and daughter to be as passionless as possible. In this scene, Warner tacitly concedes that women need to be controlled for their own good. The admirable men are those who do it with love.

The authoritarian doctor who provided scripts by which women were to live—of which Dr. Green is an example—was a popular figure of female desire in the nineteenth century. As ideologies of “true womanhood” took greater and greater hold in Victorian America, the popularity of the figure of the doctor increased. Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, whom Charlotte Perkins Gilman rendered notorious for his treatment of hysterical and neurasthenic women, exemplifies the esteemed, domineering, patriarchal doctor. Like Warner's Dr. Green, Dr. Mitchell argued that women needed to control their emotions and passions or they would succumb to internal enemies that would attack them in the form of nerves or even mental illness. When a woman “yield[s] where she should not,” he wrote, she “acquire[s] within herself a host of enemies” (131–32). Mitchell reiterates the longstanding notion that a woman is engaged in a lifelong war with her internal demons, and he represents himself as a hero whose willingness to use a strong arm is exactly what women want and need. When a woman is overcome by her passions, he says, “It then becomes the business of her physician to tell her what is real, what is unreal, what must be respected, what must be overcome or fought. . . . The hour for absolute trust has arrived, and she must now believe in her adviser, or, if she cannot, she must acquire one in whom her belief will be entire and unquestioning. . . . You tell her that she must disregard her own feelings. She credits you with knowing, and so wins her fight” (131). This doctrine echoes ideals expressed in *The Wide, Wide World*: a woman is to believe what she is told and must distrust her own feelings. She—and her unreliable feelings—are her own worst enemy. Dr. F. C. Skey, president of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, goes even further, explicitly promoting heroic sadism for doctors treating genteel women: “Ridicule to a woman of sensitive mind, is a powerful weapon . . . but there is not an emotion equal to fear and the threat of personal chastisement. . . . they will listen to the voice of authority.”⁸ Like Mitchell, Skey attributes hysteria to a woman's indulgence of her feelings and believes that she can regain health only by relinquishing herself to the authority of her doctor. What women really want, he indicates, is a domineering, condescending doctor willing to take control.

Such condescending behaviors won doctors considerable love and gratitude among female patients. Mitchell claimed that after a doctor has cured a woman by helping her with the task of self-control, “nothing seems easier than with . . . a chorus of gratitude in the woman’s soul, to show her how she has failed, and to make clear to her how she is to regain and preserve domination over her emotions” (8). And in fact, many women did feel gratitude and love for the authoritative, firm doctor who was armed with knowledge to help them with their war with their bodies.⁹ One patient wrote Mitchell, “Whilst laid by the heels in a country-house with an attack of gripe, also an invalid from gastric affliction, the weary eyes of a sick woman fall upon your face in the *Century* of this month—a thrill passes through me—at last I saw the true physician.”¹⁰ As this letter makes clear, the relationship of heroic doctor and grateful patient had the potential to inspire love and perhaps even eros: a “thrill passes through” the woman, whose self-representation as a passive and defeated “sick woman” makes “the true physician” appear more vigorously virile by contrast. Because she understands herself as a victim, an object in need of management—going so far as to speak of herself in the third person—she idealizes a doctor renowned for taking control of women’s moral flaws and helping them restrain themselves.¹¹

The Wide, Wide World, written a half-century earlier, locates the roots of such women’s attitudes in religious ideologies. The heroism of a Dr. Green or a Dr. Mitchell derives from his association with the ultimate heroic sadist, God, the heavenly physician who requires his patient’s total submission as a precondition for his healing. Mrs. Montgomery tells Ellen, “from the hand that wounds, seek the healing. He wounds that he *may* heal. He does not afflict willingly. Perhaps he sees, Ellen, that you would never seek him while you had me to cling to” (41). Certainly we see that kind Dr. Green does not afflict willingly. Warner glamorizes and idealizes the relationship of domination and submission between doctors and female patients in keeping with her religiously determined belief that salvation requires submission. She appreciates the kindness of a man who lies to women for their own good because she knows how easily women can succumb to addictive carnal pleasures, and consequently lose access to the status of true womanhood and the pleasures and powers accruing to such status—as well as access to heaven.

The pernicious ideal of female bodilessness, as seen in *The Wide, Wide World*, gives rise to an equally pernicious ideal of female contingency. These are the two principal ideologies promoting a masochistic attraction to domination in *The Wide, Wide World*. Exemplified in the grammar of Warner’s phrase “be to them,” and in Frances Cobbe’s theory of woman-as-adjective, contingency strips a woman of subjectivity, representing her as an object who only finds an identity in relation to some-

one endowed with subjectivity. Contingency is different from intersubjectivity, a term that considers a person's identity as being defined through relations with others. Intersubjectivity denotes an awareness that can lead to a compassionate, progressive, and spiritual sense of the self in relation to the rest of the world. Contingency, by contrast, is a state in which one has no sense of self at all apart from that conferred by others, a conviction that one's personal development and self-realization are irrelevant, that one exists only through and *for* others. Intersubjectivity has appropriately been celebrated in recent feminist scholarship as a feminine trait that offers a positive alternative to what it posits as "male," "Western" individualism, but overemphasizing the limitations of individuation has drawn attention away from the traumatic nature of maturation into conventional female identity in nineteenth and twentieth-century American culture.¹² In a state of contingency, in which relatedness involves subordination, what Jessica Benjamin calls "mutuality" degenerates into a relation of master to slave, of domination and subordination.

The Wide, Wide World emphasizes less the mutuality of intersubjectivity than it does the domination and subordination of contingency. The contingency of Ellen's mature identity is unbalanced and excessive. From childhood, as we have seen, Ellen learns to distrust her own senses, her own interpretations, and her own desires, deferring in all things to her mother. In her last weeks with her mother, Ellen receives a crash course in independence, but the skills she learns emphasize not problem solving, self-reliance, and tenacity, such as a boy might learn, but rather how to be contingent: to submit when the heart rebels; to display appropriately self-effacing manners that will elicit the help of others; to intuit others' thoughts and assume them as her own. When Mrs. Montgomery takes Ellen to buy a Bible, she pretends to allow Ellen to make the decision on her own, but the shopping lesson actually trains Ellen how to figure out what others think through indirect cues and to make her decision by guessing what they would have her do. Responding to her mother's hesitation to approve one of the Bibles that Ellen chooses, Ellen asks, "you don't advise me, then, to take this little beauty?" When her mother answers, "Judge for yourself; I think you are old enough," Ellen says, "I know what you think, though, mamma, and I dare say you are right, too; I won't take it, though it's a pity" (31). In such a scene, even though supposedly Ellen's independent subjectivity and her mature judgment are being affirmed ("Judge for yourself"), in fact, subjectivity is being located outside of herself ("I know what you think"), and she is acquiring a contingent identity. The lesson demonstrates to Ellen that she *cannot* judge for herself, that her best hope lies in intuiting what others think and pretending that she

has made the choice herself, either through good judgment or good taste.

Throughout her life, Ellen continues to resort to mind reading in order to figure out what she is *supposed* to think, rather than gradually learning to consider what she *does* think. When Alice Humphreys asks Ellen, “Have you a fancy for curiosities?” Ellen unenthusiastically responds, “Yes, ma’am, I believe so” (163). But Alice’s indirect cues indicate that Ellen did not accurately describe her own taste:

“Believe so!—not more than that? . . .”

“I don’t know, ma’am,” said Ellen. “I never was where I could get them.”

“Weren’t you! Poor child! Then you have been shut up to brick walls and paving-stones all your life?”

“Yes, ma’am, all my life.”

“But now you have seen a little of the country,—don’t you think you shall like it better?”

“Oh, a great deal better!”

“Ah, that’s right. I am sure you will.” (163)

Alice makes it easy for Ellen to realize what her taste is supposed to be. Although the period in which she was “shut up” with her mother is actually Ellen’s private memory of Eden, by the end of the conversation, Ellen realizes that she was a “poor child,” that the out-of-doors is now to be preferred; henceforth, she dutifully loves nature. In a subsequent lesson in taste formation, Alice is more direct, and Ellen is not so foolhardy as to consult her own inclinations: “[W]ait till you see the hemlock branches bending with a weight of snow, and then if you don’t say the winter is beautiful I’ll give you up as a young lady of bad taste.’ ‘I dare say I shall,’ said Ellen; ‘I am sure I shall like what you like’” (185). Such scenes do not simply evince a healthy relatedness, as feminist critics influenced by object-relations models of subjectivity have suggested, for underlying these frantic quests for identity is a traumatic loss of subjectivity. It is no surprise that people think Ellen has such good taste: they consistently see their own reflected back from her.

The scene in which Ellen is torn from her mother’s arms foregrounds not only the fact that Ellen inherits from her mother a contingent identity but the fact that this contingency is the basis of a masochistic erotic desire on her part. When Captain Montgomery informs Ellen that she must be separated from her mother the next morning, Ellen displays “a look of blank astonishment at first . . . but very soon indeed that changed into one of blank despair.” Because he is a boor, Ellen’s father takes comfort from Ellen’s passivity, but her mother and the reader recognize in Ellen’s blankness not resignation but terror, for she is being deprived not only of her mother’s love but of her own interiority. Her

training thus far has emphasized the suppression of all inner promptings and the assumption of the ideas and perceptions of others, her mother being the most influential of these. Separation is therefore almost lethal, and not only for Ellen but for Mrs. Montgomery, who also acquires subjectivity vicariously from the relationship:

[Mrs. Montgomery] said not a word, but opened her arms to receive her little daughter; and with a cry of indescribable expression Ellen sprang upon the bed, and was folded in them. But then neither of them spoke or wept. What could words say? Heart met heart in that agony, for each knew all that was in the other. No,—not quite all. Ellen did not know that the whole of bitterness death had for her mother she was tasting then. But it was true. Death had no more power to give her pain after this parting should be over. His after-work,—the parting between soul and body,—would be welcome rather; yes, very welcome. Mrs. Montgomery knew it all well. She knew this was the last embrace between them. She knew it was the very last time that dear little form would ever lie on her bosom, or be pressed in her arms; and it almost seemed to her that soul and body must part company too when they should be rent asunder. (63)

Living for and through others, the “true woman” finds that separation entails “the whole bitterness of death”—the death of the social self—more powerfully than it would for a man in her culture. Physical death is appropriately seen as “after-work,” particularly given the relative insignificance of the body to “true womanhood.” There are pleasures in this anguish of separation, however, which will ultimately play into the construction of a masochistic eroticism on Ellen’s part. The moment of separation, while painful, offers a rich consolation: the extremity of agony enables those who are being separated to experience a wonderfully complete union (“Heart met heart . . . for each knew all that was in the other”). As we have seen, “Sentimentalism is a manifestation of the belief in or yearning for consonance—or even unity—of principle and purpose” (Barnes, *States* 597). This scene in which Ellen and her mother are torn from each other illustrates the way that sentimentalism itself promotes such unity through pain, which paradoxically enables people to experience unity and separation simultaneously. Released by the supposed universality of that anguish from the loneliness of individuality and from the detachment of conventional social intercourse, selves in pain seem to flow into and out of each other freely through identification with each other’s pain. As Adam Smith puts it, in sympathy, “one enters, as it were, into [another’s] body.” For a moment, Ellen and her mother are one being, and as they lie in bed together, entwined in each other’s arms, they are perfectly united. They epitomize the pleasures of sentimental suffering. The paradox of unity-in-separa-

tion explains one of the great pleasures that sentimental fiction imagines: pain unites people, transcending individuality and bypassing conventional and imperfect forms of communication, such as language.

This loving union is ruptured through a female version of the classic oedipal paradigm:

Not many minutes had passed in this sad embrace, and no word had yet been spoken, no sound uttered, except Ellen’s first inarticulate cry of mixed affection and despair, when Captain Montgomery’s step was again heard slowly ascending the stairs. “He is coming to take me away!” thought Ellen; and in terror lest she should go without a word from her mother, she burst forth with, “Mamma! Speak!”

A moment before, and Mrs. Montgomery could not have spoken. But she could now; and as clearly and calmly the words were uttered as if nothing had been the matter, only her voice fell a little toward the last.

“God bless my darling child! and make her his own,—and bring her to that home where parting cannot be.”

Ellen . . . burst into uncontrollable weeping . . . she clung to her mother with a force that made it a difficult task for her father to remove her. (63–64)

A forbidding father, what Lacan calls the “*non-du-père*,” interposes itself into the closed, maternal dyad incestuously intertwined in bed. But Ellen does not receive the consolation of the “*non-du-père*” (a meaningful identity as a subject in a symbolic social system) that the oedipal boy in similar circumstances would acquire. To be sure, like the boy, Ellen seeks in language a consolation for the loss of her mother: “[I]n terror lest she should go without a word from her mother, [Ellen] burst forth with, ‘Mamma! speak!’” (63). As she enters a realm of existence independent of her mother, the paternal realm, she pleads for language to compensate for her mother’s absence, for a linguistic symbol of the transcendent communion idealized in the wordless mother-child bond. Language is therefore both a symbol of maternal presence and a tragic sign that that bond is irrecoverable. “A moment before, and Mrs. Montgomery could not have spoken,” Warner writes, recognizing that language would have destroyed the perfect heart-to-heart union she and her daughter enjoyed. However, after the moment of separation, symbolic communication is no longer superfluous but essential. Words cannot *constitute* the affectional bond (which was perfect during the silent moment when agonized heart met heart), but they can *represent* connection and mutuality and approximate the undivided union of profound heart-to-heart communication in which “neither of them spoke [yet] . . . each knew all that was in the other.” Like Lacan, Warner represents language as a means of compensating for the loss of maternal pres-

ence. It is both pain (proof of her absence) and pleasure (symbol of her presence).

The language that Mrs. Montgomery offers in response to Ellen's plea for words to compensate for her own lack deprives Ellen of the consolation of subjectivity that the oedipal boy gains at the moment of separation from his mother: "God bless my darling child! and make her his own,—and bring her to that home where parting cannot be." Mrs. Montgomery does not say "you" to Ellen; rather the grammar of her address determines Ellen's new identity as not-subject, as grammatical object contingent upon one who will "make her his own." Whereas a boy's acquisition of language affords him the compensation of meaningful subjectivity within the symbolic social system, Ellen is neither an "I" nor a "you" but rather a "her," or worse yet, "his own." The words that define Ellen's place in the symbolic, and which structure her self-conception, not only strip her of subjectivity but dictate the terms of her desire. While the boy's desire—also born in this moment—would, according to a Freudian paradigm, be for a symbolic substitute for his mother, Mrs. Montgomery determines that Ellen's desire is to be desired, and thereby to acquire vicarious subjectivity. The mother plays an important role in helping her daughter acquire agency, but the agency she teaches is that achieved through vicarious subjectivity and passive obedience to patriarchal law. The relationship Mrs. Montgomery hopes to initiate is between Ellen and God, but the language also lends itself to a more earthly relationship between Ellen and a man who will "make her his own" and "take her to his home"—a husband. Husbands are intimately linked with the divine Master because of their privileged access to the *nom-du-père*, which is off-limits for objects in the symbolic realm. While God may eventually take Ellen to his heavenly home, a man will first take Ellen to his own earthly home. The scene links Ellen's religious desire with her sexual desire; ecstasies of fusion and security await her once she has been possessed by God, and by a Godlike husband. If separation from her mother marks the birth of her sexuality as well as her sociolinguistic identity, the language of this birth propels her toward subordination.¹³

This moment of separation not only imposes upon Ellen a grammar of domination but teaches her an object lesson in the pleasures of pain. Separation creates a heart-to-heart transcendent fusion, but it predicates that ecstasy upon pain, since the ecstatic interpenetration of mother and child arises only by concentrating upon its impending loss. The pain of imminent *disunion* creates the transcendent union. Merging is achieved only through suffering, and thus this moment that witnesses the birth of Ellen's desire also witnesses the birth of her association of pleasure with pain. Ellen intuitively understands the religious

dictum that affliction is a sign of love, for she has actually had a basic experience of ecstasy achieved through agonizing suffering, and it occurred at a crucial moment, the birth of her independent, sexual self.

This pivotal experience represents the culmination of Ellen’s formation as a sexual masochist, and it puts her in a good position to be erotically attracted to John Humphreys, not *despite* the fact that he is a renowned horsewhipper (while she herself has been compared to a horse in need of breaking), but because of it. She has been educated to seek a strong man in whom to find vicarious subjectivity, one who will help her regulate her unruly passions, and if his discipline is painful, that is all the better, since Ellen empirically knows that pain can produce pleasure. The first introduction of John notes that he is “handsome enough” and bestows upon Alice a “look of love,” but also that “one look into his eyes” reveals him as “a person to be feared;—there was no doubt of that” (275). This is, of course, attractive for the little girl seeking not indulgence but severity. Later, Warner explicitly identifies John as Ellen’s “master”: “Ellen had an excellent lesson, and her master took care it should not be an easy one” (350–51). When Ellen’s mother finally dies, Ellen not surprisingly plunges into a deep melancholy, remaining without vitality until John cures her through an exacting course of intellectual and physical training. Warner points out that “Alice had endeavoured to bring this about before, but fruitlessly. What she asked of her Ellen indeed *tried* to do; what John told her *was done*” (350–51). John succeeds where Alice cannot because Alice was only a substitute mother, while Ellen has been trained to seek one “to” whom she can “be”; and lacking the authority of the “*nom-du-père*,” Alice lacks the subjectivity that will enable Ellen to come alive. Once John assumes the central position in Ellen’s life, she becomes, as it were, a heliotropic plant, drooping when separated from him and coming back to life when he appears. Sophia remarks, “Did you observe [Ellen] last night, Matilda, when John Humphreys came in? . . . I saw the colour come and her eye sparkle . . . her eye went straight as an arrow to where he was standing” (476). Ellen literally “live[s] upon” her conversations with John. Earlier, she had lived upon her conversations with her mother, but now that she has been ejected into the symbolic realm as an adjective in search of a noun, only a man can play this vivifying role for her (564).

Alice’s death symbolically completes Ellen’s protracted separation from her mother and her development of an identity within a symbolic realm structured according to language and law. A scene immediately following Alice’s death reiterates the changes in Ellen’s status from one half of a dyad to an object in a patriarchal system, a change that occurred in the momentous maternal separation scene. In this second scene, Ellen

rushes away to a hidden mountain retreat to be alone, but John finds her and offers words of religious consolation:

With an indescribable air of mingled tenderness, weariness, and sorrow, she slowly rose from her seat and put both her arms round the speaker's neck. Neither said a word; but to Ellen the arm that held her was more than all words; it was the dividing line between her and the world,—on this side every thing, on that side nothing.

No word was spoken for many minutes.

“My dear Ellen . . . let sorrow but bring us closer to him. Dear Alice is well—she is well,—and if *we* are made to suffer, we know and we love the hand that has done it,—do we not Ellie?” (443)

In this exchange between Ellen and John, as in that between Ellen and her mother, “no word was spoken,” and the two share a moment whose intimate silence bonded by a common suffering invites a comparison and contrast with the perfect union Ellen had shared with her mother. Warner does not say that “heart met heart”; rather, she says that “the arm that held her was more than all words.” If the moment transcends language, it is because John’s arm brings meaning to it; if they are experiencing an ecstasy of merging, it is not a mutual merge, but a dissolution of her being into his. Their intimate communication is regulated by the symbolic value of John’s arm, and John is not a substitute for lost Alice and lost Mrs. Montgomery, but rather a representative of paternal law. He is Ellen’s conduit to merging and intimacy, but that merge is symbolic and regulated. As “the dividing line between her and the world,” John’s arm is an image, not of plenitude, but rather of a division that structures Ellen’s social existence through difference and symbolism.

As that which structures division, John’s arm has the central organizing power that Lacan ascribes to the phallus in Western culture. It symbolizes the divisions that make all meanings within the symbolic realm, and the law that governs exchange and determines identities. Indeed, like the Lacanian phallus, John’s arm seems to be a synecdoche for God’s law, for the passage represents God’s law as a scourging hand: “if we are made to suffer, we know and we love the hand that has done it.” John’s arm brings meaning to Ellen’s life in the same way that God’s law does, and he is linked to God through the arm-hand connection. Ellen does indeed love God, and she also loves his earthly representative, this young clergyman. John tells Ellen to repeat from the very depths of her suffering, “O, how *love I thy Law*”; when she does so, she seems to be addressing both God and John (352, emphasis in original). And she demonstrates her love by embracing the punishments that both inflict.

This scene suggests how John’s associations with God make his religiously sanctioned punishments attractive to Ellen. Later, example after example indicates that she thinks of her own erotic desire in terms of punishment because of the connection between John’s chastening arm and God’s divine law. Consider an experience she has during her Scottish exile, when a glass of wine forced upon her by her relatives inspires a dream of John: “John was a king of England, and standing before her in regal attire. She offered him, she thought, a glass of wine, but raising the sword of state, silver scabbard and all, he with a tremendous swing of it dashed the glass out of her hands; and then as she stood abashed, he went forward with one of his old grave kind looks to kiss her” (520). John’s chastening arm is an object of Ellen’s romantic interest: the dream links his kisses with the chastisement his arm inflicts. The glass of wine represents the myriad forces conspiring to weaken Ellen’s Christian virtue when she is separated from John, and her fantasy that he uses the phallic “sword of state” to abash her, combined with the expectation of his kisses, suggests that his association with discipline and chastisement is eroticized in Ellen’s imagination.

The Calvinist environment surrounding Ellen strengthens her inclination to think of her romantic desire in terms of chastisement. As we have seen, the notions of divine constraint and punishment were metonymically linked in Calvinist discourse with the ecstasies associated with submission to him. The many hymns that Warner incorporates in *The Wide, Wide World*, such as the one Mr. Marshman directs Ellen to read, reiterate this familiar association between God’s disciplinary punishment and the bliss of religious rapture:

Behold the Saviour at thy door,
 He gently knocks,—has knock’d before,—
 Has waited long,—is waiting still,—
 You treat no other friend so ill.

Oh, lovely attitude!—he stands
 With open heart and outstretch’d hands.
 Oh, matchless kindness!—and he shows
 This matchless kindness to his foes.

Admit him—for the human breast
 Ne’er entertain’d so kind a guest.
 Admit him—or the hour’s at hand
 When at *his* door, denied, you’ll stand.

Open my heart, Lord, enter in;
 Slay every foe, and conquer sin.

Here now to thee I all resign
My body, soul, and all are thine. (75)

This hymn links divine intimacy to the violent assault that is a necessary prelude to its attainment. But it expresses this linkage in the sentimental language that increasingly dominated American Protestantism in the nineteenth century. Sentimentally, the hymn anthropomorphizes God with such words as “gently” and “kindness,” and a “lovely attitude,” which invite the Christian to experience the maternal intimacy that is evoked in the domestic trope of heart-as-house. But the tenderness of God in the first three stanzas is overlaid onto a Calvinist discourse of wrath in the fourth: God can wear the maternal Bushnellian face of a friend, but he can also wear the Edwardsian face of an enraged paternal Jehovah locking his own door. The hymn tacitly concedes that though people have every reason to love and desire God, it is difficult to “Admit him.” Therefore, while the first three verses urge an implied listener to seek divine intimacy, the fourth moves to first-person expressions of a longing for murderous conquest that will *force* the would-be Christian to submit. In this hymn, as in many of the sentimental novels discussed in chapter 2, though the desire is ultimately for a maternal nurturer, the terms of that desire are paternal, and violent.

This intersection of a sentimental discourse of a God apprehended through the heart with a Calvinist discourse of a God who manifests his love in mighty acts of violence furthers the eroticization of domination that characterizes *The Wide, Wide World*. The words “Here now to thee I all resign” were every bit as much a script for the bride as for the Christian convert, and the language of the hymn prompts Ellen to conceive of marital as well as religious love in terms of violence. As the scene of separation from her mother indicated, both God and husband are associated with a rapture of maternal fusion, and as we see in this hymn, the rapture of the fusion requires an act of violence designed to conquer the independent will of the bride/convert. The intersection of maternal sentimental ideals with paternal providential notions dictates that the terms of desire for that merge are masochistic: “open” me, “enter” me, “slay” and “conquer” those within, possess me “body, soul, and all.”

John Humphreys is patterned upon God as portrayed in the hymn: he has both a “lovely attitude” and a dark streak, indicating that, like God, he has the power and the character needed to sweep a woman off her feet and force her to yield to the erotic rapture of fusion with God and with himself. “Them that sleep in Jesus will God bring with him,” John tells Ellen at the close of the book. “‘I am satisfied,’ said Ellen softly, nestling again to his side;—‘that is enough. I want no more’” (583). Sleeping in Jesus is like sleeping with John, and as the word “nestling”

suggests, in sentimental fiction both are like sleeping with one's mother, a utopia of preverbal, maternal presence. But in order to achieve that maternal fusion in a world regulated by symbolic, paternal law, a woman must understand her desire for that fusion in relation to the chastening hand of the father/husband. Nineteenth-century women were not born masochists, but *The Wide, Wide World* suggests that an upbringing under the influence of the volatile intersection of two ideologies—Calvinism and true womanhood—conspired to turn them into masochists.

Horsewhipping and the Exploration of Desire

But while we can read *The Wide, Wide World* as a lurid exposure of the destruction of female subjectivity and the oppressive manipulation of female desire, we can also read it as a text that revels in its own masochism. Working within the culturally overdetermined language of desire of northeastern evangelical culture, it develops what we can recognize as a perverse masochistic discourse of erotic desire. To read the masochism in the text as a voice of sexual desire is neither to essentialize nor endorse masochism. It is rather to recognize that in her representation of a masochistic desire, Warner was not purely a victim; she was also operating as an agent—seizing, crafting and exploiting a discourse that enabled her to explore sexual fantasies.

Fantasies of surveillance are one of the most pervasive modes of erotic dreaming in *The Wide, Wide World*. John's surveillance may seem oppressive to modern readers, but for Ellen, the idea that “there was always somebody by, who whatever he might himself be doing, never lost sight of her” is deeply gratifying (464). John's omniscience bathes Ellen's body in a sensual male desire with which she can identify, vicariously providing access to her own desiring body. Like the warden in a panopticon and like God in heaven, John can say “I saw it all, Ellie” (447); he sees not only everything that Ellen does but everything she thinks: “[H]ow *could* you guess what I was thinking about, Mr. John?” Ellen asks (321); “How did you know—how could you know what I was thinking of?” (481). The transparency implicit in being completely readable is erotically charged not only because it comports with ideologies of coverture, according to which female noncorporeality is erotically desirable to a watching male, but also because it is allied with the religious ecstasies associated with total submission to God. The pleasures of examination and surveillance can be traced to the religious discourses that train Ellen to say, “Open my heart, Lord.” Not only is the sentimental image of God as the gentle, lovely guest whose outstretch'd hands offer physical intimacy metonymically evoked by a discourse of conquest and

surveillance, but it is also eroticized, when associated with the ecstasies of total fusion with God that are the promised reward for yielding oneself up. The sinner does not willingly open herself up to God, which is why an invasive stare and a severe examination are alluring.

Though John knows everything that Ellen thinks, he compels her to confess it, not for his own enlightenment, which is redundant, but for her own spiritual advancement. When John says, "I want to talk to you a little about this. Will you let me ask you a question or two?" Ellen answers, "Oh, yes—whatever he pleased" [sic] (296). She is so delighted to be examined, subjected to John's scrutiny, that at the end of the novel, when he proposes, "Perhaps I shall try you in two or three things, Ellie," she responds, "Will you! in what? Oh, it would make me so happy—so much happier" (561–63). And when she excitedly adds, "I will tell you everything about myself; and you will tell me how I ought to do in all sorts of things" (564), Ellen demonstrates the extent to which self-exposure and submission to examination express a desire for intimacy in terms that are both effective and acceptable. She also reveals the one-way nature of that exposure.

A scene from the ending of the novel exemplifies not only how surveillance functions as an expression of erotic desire but also how masochism is a way of finding erotic pleasure within the oppressive constraints of true womanhood. In this scene, John has come to visit Ellen during her Scottish exile, but before addressing her, he secretly watches her in order to see how her good character has been faring amidst a crowd of worldly pleasure seekers. He finds Ellen among a group of people singing around a piano, seeing and hearing as little as possible, diligently absorbed in the task of corporeal abjection:

Ellen's eyes were bent on the floor. The expression on her face touched and pleased him greatly; it was precisely what he wished to see. Without having the least shadow of sorrow upon it, there was in all its lines that singular mixture of gravity and sweetness that is never seen but where religion and discipline have done their work well. . . . Ellen at the moment had escaped from the company and the noisy sounds of the performer at her side; and while her eye was curiously tracing out the pattern of the carpet, her mind was resting itself in one of the verses she had been reading that same evening. (559)

Although Ellen is physically present, all of her bodily signs bespeak her absence. She neutralizes her body with tasks that keep it under restraint: with her "eyes bent on the floor," "curiously tracing out the pattern in the carpet," she prevents her body from yielding to the enticing lures of the nonspiritual and gives off an air of "gravity," an otherworldly orientation that stands in mute, unmistakable separation from the carnal, "noisy sounds of the performer." As if in search for Ellen's "true" pres-

ence, the point of view shifts in the course of the passage. The scene begins by looking at Ellen from the perspective of John or an objective narrator, reporting only observable detail. But Ellen’s physical presence only bespeaks her absence: she “had escaped.” An editorial omniscient narrator therefore takes over and scans Ellen’s interior. But she is not there either. Her presence is again deferred. As it turns out, Ellen is “*in* one of the verses,” dissolved into a disembodied spiritual state. Ellen had wondered how she would “keep [her]self right,” as she put it, without John’s ongoing disciplinary presence. This scene suggests that she maintains her “right” self by concentrating upon abjection, continuously consolidating her coherent identity as a “true woman” in the very refusal to be a body present with other bodies. When true womanhood is absence, corporeal abjection is a means of consolidating it.

Grace Ann and Theodore Hovet read this scene as illustrating Ellen’s relatively successful accommodation to her culture; where resistance is impossible, wearing a mask of social conformity leaves Ellen free to think what she wants (9–10). But I believe that such a reading of this passage exemplifies the limitations of a “liberal” celebration of freedom. Though Ellen *looks* free, it is her desire itself that is imprisoned. As Foucault observes in *Discipline and Punish*, whereas premodern methods of social control rely upon visible punishments—burning at the stake, flogging, drawing and quartering—modern power works through internalized control based upon religion and bodily discipline. Such modes of internal oppression arise in a world resembling Jeremy Bentham’s model panopticon, a model prison built around a central guard tower and designed to enable the warden to see the prisoners while remaining obscured himself. The theory behind this design, Foucault says, is that “[h]e who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. By this very fact, the external power may throw off its physical weight” (202–3). Certainly, there are no chains on Ellen, no threats of physical chastisement. Rather, in creating a scene in which Ellen’s self-erasure is “precisely what [John] wished to see,” Warner represents the way that internal subjection works. She first subjects Ellen to “a field of visibility” and then rewards her for her good behavior with a surprise visit from the warden, a dearly longed-for reward for all of her ongoing, painful renunciations. Because power works through the production of subjectivity rather than through repression, physical abjection is both Ellen’s prison and her pleasure. Her “freely chosen” physical abjection and self-dissolution can hardly be celebrated as an illustration of her protofeminist self-determination.

However, there may be a more perverse, and more deeply embedded, kind of “protofeminism” in this passage; for though it can be said to be “about” Ellen’s abjection of her body, it is also “about” sexuality. Ellen’s ethereal gravity elicits John’s desire—it is “precisely what he wished to see”—and he hints at a marriage proposal in the next pages. His desire in turn stimulates Ellen’s; “I have wanted you so very much!” she says. Although Warner does not use explicitly romantic language, most readers understand that that is what is implied. A reviewer writing in the 1851 *Godey’s Lady’s Book* suggests that nineteenth-century readers widely recognized that *The Wide, Wide World*—and particularly the ending of the book—is about romantic desire. In fact, the reviewer chastises Warner for the disingenuousness of the ending:

One of the best and most carefully drawn characters in the book is the young clergyman, John Humphreys. In his last interview with Ellen, before leaving Scotland, he enjoins upon her—not to read novels! This species of disingenuousness, be it said, is a common thing with novel-writers. Is it not an affectation of humility? Or does each novel-writer, who condemns that sort of work, consider his or her novel an exception to the rule? Such writers forget entirely the homely but wise injunction, to “honor the bridge that carries us in safety.” “The Wide, Wide World” is essentially a novel; the author perhaps thinks, because there are no professed love scenes in it, that it may escape this title. Both love and matrimony are insinuated in the concluding pages; and it does not require much knowledge of the mechanism of fiction to detect in John, from the beginning, the embryo husband of Ellen, notwithstanding their dubbing each other brother and sister; this after all, is but an old and hackneyed trick of the sentimental school, which we do not at all approve. The relation of brother and sister is too delicate in its sacredness to be thus made the cover of a more ardent affection.¹⁴

Not only the cagey modern critic, but the common reader of Warner’s day, would recognize that *The Wide, Wide World* is about an “ardent affection” whose sexual implications require the “cover” of pretended innocence.

But Warner’s denial of a romantic reading of her novel is no mere hackneyed trick. The schizophrenic attitude toward romance implicit in these last pages is central to the text’s ambivalent eroticism. For the air of chastity that Ellen gives off is precisely that which attracts John’s romantic desire; it is “precisely what he wished to see.” From John’s perspective, female purity promotes “ardent affection.” And the reader who looks at Ellen from John’s perspective gains vicarious access to desire—*his* desire. As we have seen, the point of view encompasses multiple perspectives, enabling the reader both to look *at* Ellen and to be *in* Ellen, to perceive Ellen’s desirability and to experience that desirability. The