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Review: 'Harold Frederic's Social Drama and the Crisis of 1890s Evangelical Protestant Culture'

William Vance Trollinger

University of Dayton, wtrollinger1@udayton.edu

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William Vance Trollinger Jr.

Review of:

Richmond B. Adams. *Harold Frederic's Social Drama and the Crisis of 1890s Evangelical Protestant Culture*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press (2013).

Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896) is a terrific novel. The title character is a young, naïve, poorly-educated Methodist minister who—when the narrative begins—has been appointed to take the pastorate of a small-town church in upstate New York. It is only a matter of weeks after moving to Octavius with his wife, Alice, when Theron makes the acquaintance of exotic and compelling individuals who challenge his heretofore unexamined evangelical faith. Abandoning his Methodism with impunity, Ware is soon hurtling toward his “damnation.” Damned but not dead: At the end of the novel, Theron and Alice are heading out to Seattle, where the feckless ex-minister will superintend a real estate company while considering the possibility of embarking on a career in politics.

In *Harold Frederic's Social Drama and the Crisis of 1890s Evangelical Protestant Culture*, Richmond Adams asserts that “*Theron Ware* is the representative fictional text of late nineteenth century American culture.” Adams makes this bold claim plausible with his argument that *Theron Ware* represents—what makes the novel a social document, as it were, and not simply “an aesthetic work of fiction”—the predicament of a once-dominant evangelical Protestantism as it began to lose its cultural hegemony in late nineteenth-century America. Importantly, and contra the book's title, it should be noted this evangelical “crisis” was not limited to the 1890s but stretched from the middle of the nineteenth century and culminated in the 1920s, with fundamentalism, Prohibition, and the second Ku Klux Klan all manifestations of a desperate attempt by conservative Protestants to maintain cultural control.

According to Adams, the evangelicalism we find in *Theron Ware* is not so much a set of doctrinal commitments as an “interlocking series of sociological systems” best articulated in the “etiquette manuals that permeated nineteenth century life.” Adams uses these manuals as the prism through which to examine the novel. While references to the manuals are at times rather labored, Adams nevertheless makes a convincing case that the novel's title character—in keeping with his gradually intensifying and ever-naïve intellectual and theological commitments to modernity—egregiously and repeatedly violates the cultural rules governing evangelical culture in Victorian America.

Adams organizes his book around Theron Ware's bumbling interactions with the novel's other major characters: Sister Soulsby, the pragmatic evangelist and fund-raiser; Father Forbes, the Catholic priest who introduces Ware to German Biblical criticism; Dr. Ledsmar, the scientist and agnostic; and, Celia Madden, the wealthy aesthete who is the object of Ware's intense infatuation, and who—near the novel's end—coldly rejects Ware as a “bore” (thus leading him to go on a drinking binge funded by monies he stole from his church). As Adams puts it, Forbes, Ledsmar, and Madden are the “modern triumvirate” who coldly toy with the hapless minister. They have no moral center, Ware has no ballast, and so the hapless minister is doomed.

Ditto for the evangelical culture that *Theron Ware* so ably represents. The intellectually vacuous and morally bankrupt evangelicalism of nineteenth-century America was destined to fade away, and good riddance. But it was being replaced by a modernity that was—as exemplified by the three moderns who indifferently ensure Theron’s damnation—amoral at its very core. According to Adams, Frederic’s novel presents us with a “cultural, rather than strictly mechanistic, naturalism.” Cultural or mechanistic, the results are inevitable and dismal. As Adams reads *Theron Ware*, modernity’s moral indifference had loosed “the forces of barbarism.” The only hope—found in the novel’s final pages, as Alice prepares to head West with her husband—is to face destruction in the company of another. As Adams puts it, “While meeting the forces of modernity together may not prevent destruction, to encounter them alone is a fate almost too horrific to contemplate.”

Here, in particular, Adams makes good use of Harold Frederic’s papers to inform his reading of *Theron Ware*. *Given* this, it seems odd that he tells us virtually nothing about the author himself. Much more problematic is the writing. There is inordinate repetition throughout, particularly when it comes to discussing what other literary critics have said (or failed to say) about the novel; there are a number of sentences that make little or no sense, perhaps because they have words missing (e.g., on pages 64, 129, 264); there is an over-abundance of infelicitous phrases, e.g., “once Americans stopped militarily killing each other” and “meandering towards the evolving organ.” *Harold Frederic’s Social Drama and the Crisis of 1890s Evangelical Protestant Culture* seems to be one of those cases when a dissertation is rushed into publication virtually “as is,” without the benefits of substantive editorial work.

This is unfortunate. Richmond Adams makes an insightful argument that gets at what makes Harold Frederic’s novel a powerful social document that reveals much about the decline of Protestant hegemony in the United States. That is to say, despite the problematic prose, Adams’s book is worth reading (if perhaps not buying, given the price). And Harold Frederic’s *The Damnation of Theron Ware* is absolutely worth reading, and re-reading.