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Working With(in) the Logic of the Jeremiad: Responding to the Writing of Evangelical Christian Students

This study shows how the rhetorical form of the jeremiad emerges in academic writing produced by one evangelical Christian student. Recognizing the jeremiad in student writing can help compositionists and literature instructors better understand the rhetorical choices of such students and help them leverage the jeremiad's resources for rhetorical ends.

In order to respond more effectively to those who write about religion, we would benefit from extended conversation of the ways in which faith is "enacted" in discourse.

—Lizabeth A. Rand

Composition studies has begun to have the "extended conversation" about religious faith in academic writing that Lizabeth A. Rand called for in 2001, a reality evidenced by the publication of numerous articles in our field's journals and by collections such as Elizabeth Vander Lei and bonnie lenore kyburz's *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom*, Vander Lei et al.'s *Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition*, and Michael-

CCC 68:4 / JUNE 2017

John DePalma's and my *Mapping Christian Rhetorics*. Within this conversation, we've interrogated ways whereby religiously committed students such as evangelical Christians integrate religious discourse in their academic writing. Consequently, we have focused on features such as biblical citation (Carter; Peters; Ringer, "Consequences"), appeals to absolute truth (Downs; Hunt; Montesano and Roen; Perkins, "Attentive"), religious self-reflection (DePalma; Ringer, "Dogma"), witnessing or testimony (Anderson; Rand; Smart), and conversion narratives (Perkins, "Radical"). Our goal in this conversation reflects Rand's sentiment and is laudable: we seek to understand better our religiously committed students and invent ways of responding productively to academic writing that enacts religious discourse.

Surprisingly absent from this discussion is extended consideration of the jeremiad, the three-part rhetorical form that defines an original promise or calling, condemns failure to live up to that calling, and advocates for return to and fulfillment of the original promise. While our lack of scholarly attention could be explained by the absence of jeremiads in the writing of religiously committed students, I show in this essay that the jeremiad does emerge in student writing. That it does should come as little surprise: the jeremiad is a pervasive rhetorical form in American public discourse, emerging in sermons (Danforth), political speeches (Medhurst; Murphy), civil rights discourse (Howard-Pitney; Miller), popular films (Owen), hip-hop (P. Williams), and middle-class identity itself (Bercovitch). I argue here that recognizing the jeremiad when it emerges in student writing can help instructors of writing, rhetoric, and literature better understand the motives shaping the rhetorical choices of some evangelical Christian student writers, especially when those choices defy writing instructors' expectations.

Elizabeth Vander Lei has argued that the incorporation of religious discourse in academic writing often prompts writing instructors to enact "intellectual violence" against the students who produce it ("Ain't" 91), whether by formulating harsh responses (Downs 39-40), dismissing a draft as "Hopeless" (Peters 122), or barring religious discourse from the classroom altogether (Vander Lei, "Where" 70). The danger of such violence is that it can prompt evangelical Christian students to disengage rather than learn from tensions that can arise between religious and academic discourses (Vander Lei, "Coming" 8, "Where" 71). Knowledge of the jeremiad can help compositionists avoid such violence and keep students engaged by responding in ways that value the rhetorical resources evangelical students

bring with them to the classroom (DePalma). Working with(in) the logic of the jeremiad rather than against it—leveraging the values embedded in the form rather than asking students to sanitize their writing of religious discourse—affords writing instructors strategies for encouraging revision that honors student faith and promotes rhetorical awareness. In particular, writing instructors can leverage the logic of the jeremiad to help students claim rhetorical agency, clarify rhetorical concerns like audience and purpose, revise drafts for greater coherence, and perceive themselves as individuals undergoing subtle yet progressive transformations (Ringer, *Vernacular*; M. Williams). In short, recognizing the jeremiad when it emerges in student writing can help writing instructors fulfill Rand’s goal of “respond[ing] more effectively” to the writing of evangelical Christian students (350).

I make this argument by analyzing the writing of one white, male evangelical Christian student at a northeastern public university whose literary analysis of Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl* employs a jeremiad. At first glance, his writing would strike many compositionists and literature instructors as inappropriate. To echo Lynn Z. Bloom, Justin’s analysis “wanders to” Christian testimony, ending on what appears to be a direct attempt to convert the reader—writing that many instructors would consider “out of bounds” (Bloom 364). While I certainly agree that Justin’s writing is problematic—in addition to evangelizing in his writing, Justin appropriates a novella about a Jewish character and by a Jewish author for Christian ends—my goal here is to offer a sensitive reading of Justin’s writing by using the logic of the jeremiad to understand it from the inside out. To do so, I first discuss the jeremiad as rhetorical form and then explore the background and context for my study with Justin. Next, I analyze two versions of Justin’s paper on *Yekl*—the original he wrote for a literature course at a public university and the revision he produced for this study based on his professor’s feedback. I close by naming ways compositionists can work with(in) the logic of the jeremiad to help students like Justin leverage its resources rhetorically.

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The Jeremiad as Rhetorical Form

Jeremiads are a form of epideictic that feature a three-part structure: reminder of an original promise or calling, condemnation of present failure to live up to that promise or calling, and a call to return to and fulfill the promise (Bercovitch; Howard-Pitney; Medhurst; Miller; Murphy; Owen). As epideictic, jeremiads offer a combination of praise and blame aimed at displaying values assumed to be held by an audience (Aristotle 32; Condit; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 47-51). By celebrating shared values, jeremiads function to define and sustain rhetors' identities and the communities to which they belong (Condit; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 51). Celeste Michelle Condit notes that epideictic can help speakers define and understand crises they find "confusing and threatening" (288). Such rhetorical action benefits rhetors by helping them achieve "power through the power to define" (288), a point that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca echo when they argue that "the speaker" who enacts epideictic "turns educator" (51). By defining troubling instances through deeply held values and beliefs, rhetors help shape and maintain their own identities and invite like-minded audiences to do the same.

While jeremiads are not necessarily religious in nature, their ancestry is in sermons such as Samuel Danforth's 1670 "A Brief Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness." Danforth's sermon features heavy doses of scripture aimed at praising God's goodness and blaming his fellow New Englanders for their shortcomings. The crisis that occasioned Danforth's sermon involved Puritans forgetting their original calling—their errand to the New World—and embracing contrary values like "worldly Cares" and "predominant Lusts" (16). Danforth aims to prompt himself and his fellow New Englanders to remember the values that define them as a community. He thus stresses remembrance. After reminding himself and his fellow Puritans that they had "forgotten our Errand into the Wilderness" (10), Danforth urges them "to remember whence we are fallen, and repent, and do our first works" (21). His use of inclusive pronouns highlights the extent to which jeremiads assume audiences that espouse shared values. The words "we" and "our" appear frequently in the sermon, often in phrases like "our Saviour," "our Errand," "our Faith." Danforth positions himself as part of the audience.

Danforth's emphasis on the Puritans' decline from their Christian errand and on the hope that they might be able to do their "first works"

underscores another feature of jeremiads: they combine awareness of present shortcomings with an optimistic vision of the future. Errand implies “unfulfillment,” and Sacvan Bercovitch explains that the American jeremiad “made anxiety its end as well as its means” (23). One of the primary characteristics of the jeremiad is its use of crisis to draw attention to conditions that represent a departure from the ideal but can be remade. Bercovitch notes that Puritans “fastened upon” and “gloried in” crisis: “They took courage from backsliding, converted threat into vindication, made affliction their seal of progress” (62). A. Susan Owen says something similar when she writes that jeremiads function as “corrective[s] to contemporary conditions gone awry” (250). Due to their corrective ends, jeremiads emphasize the possibility that progress can result from present shortcomings. Jeremiads don’t draw attention to crisis simply for the sake of doing so, however. They employ the language of crisis to encourage progress toward an ultimate goal and provide rhetors and audiences with “a sense of purpose, direction, and continuity” (Bercovitch 80).

The logic of the jeremiad can be understood via key terms such as *crisis*, *community*, *remembrance*, and *like-minded audience*, terms that underscore the conservative ends of jeremiads (Murphy 402; Owen 273–75). By prompting rhetors and like-minded audiences to remember the past and embrace core values, jeremiads ask audiences and rhetors to return to what they deem to be of central importance. Because of this, jeremiads have earned their fair share of criticism. John M. Murphy, for instance, notes that jeremiads can limit “the scope of reform and the depth of social criticism” available to a society at a given time (402). Keith D. Miller has shown how Malcolm X’s radical rhetoric developed partly in opposition to the overuse of the African American jeremiad among his peers and forebears. Miller prompts compositionists to interrogate how ideologies become hegemonic within cultural constructions such as jeremiads and to follow Malcolm X’s lead in framing alternative bases for literacy education.

While jeremiads do function in conservative ways, they don’t inhibit all change or progress. Jeremiads as epideictic can lead rhetors and audiences “in new directions” (Hauser 17). Takis Poulakos demonstrates this possibility via his analysis of Greek funeral orations. While he agrees that epideictic oratory encourages audiences to embrace core values, he also argues that it

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functions “to inaugurate human agency” (181). According to Poulakos, the potential for such agency results from the tension audiences and rhetors experience when bringing old values into new contexts. Because “old” values come from a specific time and place in the past, when they are remembered or recontextualized in the present, those values must be remade, reshaped,

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and reformed. Even when rhetors seek to value what they perceive to be their original calling or purpose via the jeremiad, that calling will take on a different valence in the context of the present than it did in

the past. And it is that intermixing of conservation and change Bercovitch addresses when he argues that jeremiads promote “progress through continuity” (71). Jeremiads certainly call rhetors and audiences to remember existing values, but they also demand that rhetors and audiences reinterpret those values in light of present situations.

Thus the final key term I associate with jeremiads is *agency*. Jeremiads constitute strategies whereby rhetors attempt to recontextualize values to make sense of crisis, uncertainty, or change. A form of casuistry, recontextualization never leaves values unchanged (Booth 119–22; Burke 230, 309). It can lead to changes in values themselves (Ringer, “Consequences”) or to transformations in how rhetors relate to the discourses in which such values are embedded (Ringer, *Vernacular*; M. Williams). The agency that jeremiads afford rhetors and audiences certainly entails naming current situations—Condit’s “power through the power to define” (288)—but it can also foster development in rhetors. Such growth could entail the ability to adjust to changing situations without coming unmoored, to engage with values or discourses different from one’s own, or even to function as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s rhetor-turned-educator (51). If this is true—if jeremiads afford rhetors the agency to grapple with changing circumstances and remake themselves and their values in light of new situations—then the jeremiad in student writing may help compositionists perceive how students are maintaining their faith while also transforming it and developing rhetorically. This is the potential that I see in Justin’s jeremiad.

Background and Context

Justin¹ originally wrote his analysis of *Yekl* for an upper-level American literature course taught by a white, female, tenured professor at a north-

eastern public university in spring 2007. According to the syllabus, the course focused on American literature between 1865 and 1915 and featured such authors as Kate Chopin, Zitkála-Šá, and Abraham Cahan. The professor, “Christine,” had a background in American studies and a deep understanding of and appreciation for the forms of Christianity that shaped nineteenth-century American life. While she didn’t espouse any formal religion at the time she taught Justin’s class, she did have a background in mainline Protestantism. To my knowledge, the class did not explicitly discuss the American jeremiad.

Christine knew of my interests in religion and academic writing and asked Justin if he would be willing to talk with me. I met Justin informally at the end of the semester in the writing center where he worked and then interviewed him during the summer of 2007 based on his original draft. Classes weren’t in session, so we arranged to meet at his parent’s home about eighty miles from campus. Since the best day for both of us was a Sunday, he invited me to join him for church. I took him up on his offer, and my observations from that service inform my understanding of Justin’s faith. Justin likely felt comfortable inviting me to church because he knew of my own Christian faith—that I grew up in evangelicalism, graduated from a Christian college, and attended an Episcopal church near our public university. From the outset of my research with Justin, I positioned myself as an “insider” to evangelical Christian faith and discourse (Cope and Ringer).

Following our first interview, I asked Justin to revise his essay based on Christine’s comments. Because I wanted Justin to think about his revision as academic writing and as an extension of his American literature course, I planned to share Justin’s revision with Christine and solicit her response. Christine was unable to participate in the research due to family reasons, and so I did not conduct that part of the study. However, Justin made it clear during our second interview that he thought Christine was going to read his revision and thus wrote with her in mind. He did so in part because I asked him in his revision to account for the comments Christine wrote on his original final draft, particularly the endnote:

This is a very interesting and promising essay. The way you link your quest for identity to Yekl’s is potentially very powerful. However, the essay does not pull these connections together into a focused argument or delve more deeply into their implications. For example, it might be worth making explicit that while Yekl sheds his religious faith and identity and as a result felt even more

confused and ambivalent by the novella's end, you have held on to your faith and identity as a Christian and, as a result I suspect, feel able to confront a very difficult transition in your life with confidence.

Justin agreed to revise. Due to scheduling conflicts and geographical distance, we weren't able to meet for the second interview until January 2008. Each interview lasted nearly twice as long as the hour I intended, largely because Justin had little problem talking about his beliefs and experiences as a Christian. His experience as a writing center tutor also gave him a vocabulary for discussing his writing.

The particular assignment for which Justin wrote his essay on *Yekl* invited students to analyze characters undergoing "changes in and even reconstruction of identities." The prompt observes that stories like *Yekl* demonstrate "that social mobility and cultural transformation are not simple processes, but rather ones whose gains are often balanced or even overshadowed by losses." The assignment encourages students to "[d]iscuss this process in one or more of the texts we have read this semester." Christine mentions *Yekl* specifically when she suggests that students might "[e]xplore the concept of 'liminality' in one or more of the texts we have read so far." She defines liminality as "the psychological state of being 'on the threshold'" and notes that it can describe people who are "in transition between two roles, two stages in life, or [. . .] between two cultures and their different ways of constructing identity." While Christine made no explicit mention about students incorporating personal experiences in their analyses, her marginal comments on Justin's first version suggests she welcomed such perspectives.

How, though, does Justin enact a jeremiad? Answering this question requires understanding of the novella itself. *Yekl* is a story about an Orthodox Jew who emigrates from Russia to the United States. Like many immigrants of his time, Yekl leaves behind his family until he can earn enough money to pay for them to join him. Once in the United States, Yekl slowly sheds his cultural and religious identity in favor of American cultural practices. Eventually, he goes so far as to change his name to "Jake." When his wife Gitl and son Yosselé arrive in the United States, Yekl realizes the extent to which his new identity has supplanted his prior one. By the novella's end, "Jake" has divorced Gitl and is on his way to elope with a prostitute named Mamie. As the assignment prompt puts it, *Yekl* demonstrates the extent to which "[i]ntegrating an older way of life with the demands of a newer one

may prove surprisingly difficult, or even impossible.”

Justin takes up the theme of liminality in *Yekl* because he perceives the novella to be “analogous” to his own life (Bloom 365). When Justin first read *Yekl*, he was in a period of crisis, one wherein what he called his “original identity” was being “challenged” (first interview). Much of this challenge was spiritual: Justin said in our first interview that it was “hard” to retain his identity as an evangelical Christian in a state university context he viewed as immoral. He said he felt “caught in the middle” between what he perceived to be competing values and identities: “It’s like how can you be still you and like—and have your belief system—but also not completely be isolated, you know, from the rest of your society that you’re hanging around with?” (first interview). Add to this socio-spiritual crisis a slew of uncertainties related to finances, graduation, and an uncertain future, and it’s evident why Justin found himself facing an identity crisis that demanded an epideictic response (Condit 288). By enacting a jeremiad in his analysis of *Yekl*, Justin seeks to remind himself of and reestablish his identity as a Christian. In what follows, I discuss two versions of Justin’s essay to show how the jeremiad emerges in both drafts, serves as a focal point for his process of revision, and affords Justin agency.

First Version

It doesn’t take much more than a casual read to determine that “‘Who Am I?’ The Identity Crisis” would defy the expectations of many composition and literature instructors. The paper can be divided into three distinct sections: personal narrative, wherein Justin recounts his own experience of being in a liminal state as a middle schooler (“We were not adolescents, nor were we young adults”); literary analysis, wherein he analyzes how *Yekl* explores questions of identity; and Christian testimony, wherein Justin answers the identity question via biblical citation and witnessing. Justin’s transitions are noteworthy. At the bottom of page two, Justin transitions from his personal narrative to the literary analysis:

Just as the teenage population in America living during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries find themselves disoriented, confused, and unsure of who they are, several writers of the last quarter of the nineteenth century ask similar questions. One author in particular strikes the most loudly, at least to me, above those that we have studied. Abraham Cahan addresses the issue of this “shattered” identity in his novella *Yekl*.

In the margins next to this transition, Christine wrote “Nice connection” and underlined it twice, suggesting that this move is appropriate. Pages three through eight comprise Justin’s analysis of the novella, and while that section deals with the question of uncertainty, as Justin announces in his transition, it makes no mention of his liminality as a thirteen-year-old. Despite that absence, Christine wrote encouraging marginal comments like “good” and “right” throughout this section.

The next transition—the one that “wanders to” Christian testimony (Bloom 364)—comes into clarity when read through a jeremiadic lens. In the middle of page eight, Justin arrives at the novella’s closing scene where Jake, whose divorce is now finalized, experiences conflict as he nears City Hall where he is to elope with Mamie. The story reads, “Each time the car came to a halt he [Jake] wished the pause could be prolonged indefinitely; and when it resumed its progress, the violent lurch it gave was accompanied by a corresponding sensation in his heart” (Cahan 89). After noting that Jake “does not even know who he is anymore” (8), Justin includes the following transition, which I quote at length:

Jake may never truly find out who [he] is. He will mostly likely spend the rest of his life questioning himself as a person. He will ask himself each day if he made the right choices and if his life would be better off if he had stayed with Gitl and Joey. I feel that I am heading into a world of transition and change in my life. I am a senior, but I am not going to be able to graduate as a result of failing to make sure all my general education requirements were met. I am unable to afford an apartment, finding a full-time job in the surrounding area is virtually impossible, and I am unable to pay for the classes I am going to need to take to finish my degree. Next year, I will be living at home working, most likely at a restaurant, and taking classes at the local community college where it is cheaper and credits can transfer back to [the university]. I will neither be a college graduate nor a member of the full-time-mortgage-car payment real world.

This is Justin’s crisis, and its presence in his essay offers one textual clue that alerts readers to the jeremiad. Such crisis represents the “troubling” event that prompts an epideictic response (Condit 288). As Justin put it, “[A]t that point a lot of things were very unclear to me as to what I was supposed to be doing, you know, in—with my life” (second interview). It’s worth noting that Justin’s crisis is material and economic as well as spiritual, a point that coincides with Bercovitch’s linking of the jeremiad to American

middle-class values. Justin seems to be experiencing what Bercovitch, writing in reference to the rapid social change in colonial New England, refers to as “a troubled period of maturation” (20).

True to the jeremiadic form, though, the reiteration of the divine promise is close at hand. Justin’s next paragraph begins as follows:

However, since I was a young teenager asking the questions of who I was, I have now since found my identity. In the book of “Galatians” found in the *Bible* it says in chapter 3 verse 26 through chapter 4 verse 7, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. [. . .] Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”

From there, we read Justin’s conclusion, which is arguably the most inappropriate feature of his essay. His closing line reads, “I am a Son of my redeemer, the loving creator of everything in the universe, the almighty God. My question is now: ‘Who are you?’” While nothing earlier in the essay prepares readers for a shift from *Yekl* and Justin’s middle-class identity crisis to witnessing, this transition represents jeremiadic resolution. Justin’s dramatic shift from the uncertainty of his middle-class situation to the certainty of his eternal situation demonstrates the extent to which “the promise and the condemnation” in jeremiads are intimately intertwined (Bercovitch 16).

Justin’s attention to audience here is important. He introduces Galatians 3.26–4.7 in ways that correspond with how another student, Austin, introduces a passage from the Bible. Austin initiated his biblical citation with the phrase, “In the book of Joshua in the Old Testament of the Bible” (qtd. in Ringer, *Vernacular* 73). Justin’s similar phrasing suggests that, like Austin, he knows he is writing for an audience that might be unfamiliar with the Bible. As such, Justin’s intended audience likely includes people who do not share his values and original calling, a point that suggests Justin aimed to share his faith with people who didn’t espouse it. When I asked Justin to talk about his audience—particularly in terms of the “you” in his final sentence—he spoke in ways that indicated he didn’t have a clear sense of it: “Good question. ‘Cuz like, I remember, I handed the paper in, and I was talking with my roommate, and I was like, ‘I don’t think that was actually

directed at Christine.” He laughs: “I mean, it really wasn’t. I think it was just directed at, like, anybody, you know? It’s like, if I gave it to my mom to read.” Justin here invokes something akin to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s “universal audience” (31–35), which indicates there’s room to interpret his purpose as proselytization. While his evangelical Christian mother would accept Justin’s appeal to scripture, the universality of “anybody” suggests that some readers would not. Justin’s ambivalence about his conclusion also suggests that he might have been enacting a conventional ending for student essays: given the crisis he explored, he felt compelled to end on a positive note. Indeed, what could be more positive than eternal salvation?

At the same time, the abrupt transition from middle-class uncertainty to religious certainty indicates a motive other than proselytization or conventional endings, though I think both of those motives emerge in Justin’s conclusion. As I noted earlier, remembrance is one of the primary functions of the jeremiad, and this theme emerges when Justin talks about his purpose for writing his essay in our first interview. More specifically, it becomes evident that Justin’s purpose is to remember his “original identity,” an identity that is wrapped up in his sense of calling as an evangelical Christian as expressed through his citation of Galatians. As Justin put it, “me writing this was just to remind myself, you know, that this is, like, who I am.” He continues:

’Cuz, you know, it’s hard sometimes. [. . . W]hen you’re in a setting that’s not really catered to Christian ideals, you know, especially when you have organizations like [Residential Life] who make RAs hand out condoms to the residents. And when you have, like, you know, when—when tuition increases rise and you realize, “Oh, wait a minute. My tuition money’s going to pay for these condoms that are being handed out”—and all this other stuff. And, I mean, it’s a big challenge. Um, it’s been a big challenge. (first interview)

Here we have a clear iteration of the first two points of the jeremiad: original promise and “contemporary conditions gone awry” (Owen 250). Moreover, it’s clear that Justin, like Danforth, includes himself among his intended audience. He may want to share his faith, but he also wants to reestablish his own identity as an evangelical Christian during a period of crisis.

Despite his lack of clarity concerning audience, Justin gains “power through the power to define” by naming and defining the “troubling” events he finds “confusing and threatening” (Condit 288). This occurs via Justin’s

act of drawing attention to a present state of decline or crisis, which in his reading of *Yekl* amounts to highlighting the eponymous character's falling away from his original identity as he became "Jake." The message that Justin takes from the novella is that even in the context of rapid and troubling change, he must "embrac[e] the Christian identity [. . .] rather than forsak[e] it" (second interview). Equally important, Justin in our second interview emphasized the rhetorical power of writing about his faith: "In this whole process [. . .], I came to a place where I was—I admitted it and put it out there, you know, that I understand and I know and I agree with this [Christian faith], you know? [. . .] And it's like, yeah, and making it stronger, and having that foundation be stronger." His essay thus can be read as a progression toward reestablishment of what Justin calls his "original identity." The wanderings from Justin's literary analysis to his personal crisis ("I feel that I am heading into a world of transition and change in my life") and then from personal crisis to statement of faith ("I have now since found my identity") indicate the jeremiadic move from crisis to hope for fulfillment. Justin's first version of his essay on *Yekl* may defy compositionists' expectations, but through it he's able to remind himself that his faith constitutes his "primary kind of selfhood" (Rand 350).

What happens when Justin revises his essay based on Christine's comments? Justin's revision leads to an essay that still features a jeremiad but that is far more cohesive than his first version. Because he named his crisis and reminded himself of his religious identity in his first essay, he is able to look outward in his revision and write for other Christian students who might experience crises similar to his own. Moreover, recontextualizing his values to make sense of his identity crisis from his first essay allows him to alter his relationship to those values in subtle but significant ways.

Second Draft

Despite the fact that Justin revised for our case study and not for a course or grade, it's evident he took the revision process seriously: the second draft represents a complete overhaul of the first. Justin reorganized, produced new writing, and deleted sections from his earlier version that didn't fit. He discussed his process in our second interview:

I went through my old paper, took a black Sharpie, got rid of everything that didn't apply to the circumstance. And I kind of wrote in green highlighted

marker: “this talks about the original identity,” “this talks about the reconstructed identity,” “this talks about when those two identities clash,” “this talks about the reminder of all that”—like, the reminding factor [...] that he’s supposed to be Yekl and he very consciously makes the choice not to pursue that anymore.

This and other comments make it clear that Justin had a robust set of strategies for revising his essay. Moreover, it suggests that the logic of the jeremiad constituted the focus for his revision.

Note, for instance, Justin’s emphasis on remembrance when describing his process. Both the material strategies he adopts to help him revise

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(crossing out segments with a black Sharpie that don’t belong, marking in green those that do) and the substantive elements he features in his argument (original identity, reconstructed identity, clash of identities) all point to what he calls “the reminding factor,” which is that Yekl is “supposed to be Yekl.” His revision process encompasses the three elements of the jeremiad: promise (original identity, Yekl), decline or crisis (reconstructed identity, ensuing “clashes”), and reinstatement of the promise (“he’s supposed to be Yekl”). While Justin’s revision lacks the jarring transitions in his first draft, the logic of the jeremiad still undergirds his argument and even constitutes the focus of his revision process.

In our second interview, Justin said that one of his goals in revising was to make his paper more cohesive while retaining the same “solid message.” Arguably, he does both, largely by introducing his faith earlier in the second draft than in the first. At the bottom of page two, he writes, “As a born again Christian, I believe that we were created by God for a specific and unique purpose.” He then quotes a passage from Genesis: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (1.26–27). This leads Justin to claim that Adam’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden amounted to “humanity stray[ing] from its original, intended purpose: to know and live in the presence of God.” Thus readers get a sense of the first two elements of the jeremiad by the third page of Justin’s paper: the “original, intended promise” of communion with God and the decline from that promise as represented by humanity’s choice “to distance itself from its original design.”

Justin’s next paragraph transitions to Cahan’s novella:

Whether he understood or recognized this concept or not, late nineteenth century author Abraham Cahan picked up on this theme in his novella *Yekl*. The story focuses on the experiences of an Orthodox Jewish family immigrating and assimilating into the American culture. Cahan tackles the conflicting identities of the original creation and the identity separate from the creation and the following collision course for disaster. Whether Cahan knew it or not, he asks a provocative question, “Are you who you are supposed to be?”

Certainly Justin’s reading of a Jewish character by a Jewish writer for Christian ends is problematic, and I am in no way attempting to suggest it isn’t. When I asked Justin to talk about how he might respond to the critique that he’s imposing a Christian perspective onto a Jewish one, he said the following: “I wasn’t saying that Yekl’s a Christian. You know? I was just drawing a parallel. You know, had Yekl been a Hindu person coming into—or Buddhist, or something else [. . .], I would have said the same thing” (second interview). Justin arguably compounds the problem here, since his response suggests he views each of these religions as more or less interchangeable. In doing so, he’s erasing over the fact that being Jewish has as much to do with ethnicity as with religion.

Christine did not comment on Justin’s Christian reading of *Yekl* when he submitted the first version of his essay, though I wish she had. When I brought up the concern in our second interview, Justin seemed open to thinking about that difference. But while I could muse on how such thinking might have led to a different revision, such speculation doesn’t help us understand the essay he did produce—an essay that, more so than his first, banks on the notion of analogy that Bloom suggests is what prompts students to wander away from academic analysis (365). The phrase Justin uses that keys us in to his logic is “drawing a parallel.” Later in our second interview, Justin referred to his interpretation as an “analogy” or “parable,” which corresponds to his thesis: “To make an analogy: Yekl is to the original, intended identity created by God with God as Jake is to the banal, deviant identity created by man separate from God.” Evident here are the first two terms of the jeremiad (“original” and “deviant”), as well as a clear statement of the fact that Justin reads *Yekl* as “analogous” to his own situation and that of college students like him (Bloom 365). For better or worse, Justin reads *Yekl* as equipment for Christian living.

For better or worse, Justin reads *Yekl* as equipment for Christian living.

While Justin's revision evidences spiritual agency—he noted at several points during our second interview that the process of writing strengthened his faith—it does not dispel jeremiadic anxiety. His final paragraph reads as follows:

Jake's situation would have been radically different had he decided to return to the Yekl he was created to be. He would have been freed from the torment and turmoil of the inner battles that he is going to feel the rest of his life as a result of the decision to abandon his life as Yekl. When a person follows in the identity that God has created for them, that person is freed from a life of bondage to the inner turmoil. That person will have an unwavering certainty of who they are. "Come, follow me," Christ tells humanity. "Seek first the kingdom of my Father. Seek first the identity my Father has for you, and you shall receive His blessings." "Find your identity in who you were created to be," Yekl tells Jake. Every person has a choice to make. Will he choose to live in the identity that God has created for him, or will he choose to follow his own sense of identity and suffer the eternal consequences that result?

Note the tension. Justin names the promise ("the identity God has created") and the condemnation (one's "own sense of identity" and its eternal consequences). Note, too, the choice—to accept or reject what is the resolution (e.g., Christ and thus a relationship with God). Finally, note the sense of ambiguity with which the essay ends—not on any firm answer, but on a question that lingers and remains unanswered.

Like his first paper, Justin's conclusion prompts questions about audience, especially considering he's still writing in universal terms (e.g., "humanity," "Every person has a choice to make."). Is he trying to convert the reader? Who is his audience? Justin spoke to these questions in our second interview:

I was kind of thinking, like, there are these Christian colleges out there. You know, and they have literature classes, I'm sure. They probably use some of the texts that, like, regular state [. . .] schools use for their literature classes. And part of me was thinking, "Well, if I was a Christian student in one of these Christian schools, and I was assigned this book, I would like to have a foreword in there [. . .] that kind of combines what the book is talking about [. . .] with the Christian viewpoint."

Later in the interview, Justin talked further about his audience:

If I was a Christian student [. . .] in a Christian college [. . .], I think this would be helpful. You know, so that I don't [. . .] find myself completely disillusioned

with what I just read, you know? And trying to [...] firmly establish, “Okay, this is the truth.” You know, “Don’t let whatever is in this book detract from that.” I mean, let it challenge you, [...] but don’t dwell on it too much, type of thing.

Justin is not so much aiming to convert his non-Christian readers as he is hoping to help his imagined audience of Christian college students maintain their identities. Like Danforth, he’s reminding his like-minded audience of who they are and what defines them as a community—and prompting them (and himself) to reflect on whether they are making the kinds of choices they want to make.

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Having achieved a degree of spiritual agency by writing his first essay, Justin in his revision “turns educator” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 51). While his first essay helped him name and define his identity, in the second version he hopes to help other Christian college students remember their own identity. Thus Justin fulfills a goal of the jeremiad unmet in his first version: speaking to a public audience. Whereas his notion of audience initially was murky at best, the revision, with its remarkable emphasis on Christian college students who might encounter *Yekl* in a literature course, turns outward. But is this conception of audience and purpose appropriate for academic writing in a public university setting? Perhaps not. And yet, it’s worth underscoring here Justin’s subtle yet significant transformation. During our first interview, Justin described the line of thinking that shaped the first version of his essay as follows: “It’s like how can you be still you and like—and have your belief system—but also not completely be isolated, you know, from the rest of your society that you’re hanging around with?” Justin at that point was grappling with values that did not align with those promoted by his faith, and his attitude toward them was largely oppositional—it’s “you” versus “society,” and the result is isolation. Justin, though, doesn’t retreat. He remains engaged and continues to sort out who he is in relation to that society by reestablishing his faith and attempting to recontextualize it.

Through his revision process, Justin’s attitude changes. The point Justin wants his Christian college student audience to take from his essay is that reading *Yekl* shouldn’t “detract from” the truth they know. Then he adds: “I mean, let it challenge you, [...] but don’t dwell on it too much.” Admitting that it’s good for one’s beliefs to be challenged suggests that

Justin has shifted away from an oppositional stance regarding discourses other than his own toward one of openness. He still seeks to preserve his and his audience's Christian faith, but he's doing so from a slightly different vantage. His relationship to those values has changed. At the end of our second interview, Justin spoke to this change when he noted that he is "willing to let change happen" now that he feels his "foundation" in his

Having remembered and recontextualized core values, Justin has freedom to encounter new perspectives without the fear of becoming unmoored. He can go in "new directions" (Hauser 17).

faith is secure. Justin added, "Christians are willing to let change happen" because "they're not the ones doing the change." While this idea seemingly conflicts with the notions of agency I have argued for here, the perspective Justin arrives at resonates with Rand's point that evangelical Christians often

experience "a whole new freedom after turning their lives over to God" (362). Having remembered and recontextualized core values, Justin has freedom to encounter new perspectives without the fear of becoming unmoored. He can go in "new directions" (Hauser 17).

Granted, there's no radical transformation going on here, and the growth Justin evidences is modest at best. He calls on his audience not to dwell too much on perspectives that depart from their own, and any change he's open to would be circumscribed by his faith. But Justin has grappled with values different from his own and realized that he can learn something from them—about himself, about his faith, and about the world around him. Justin's writing and talk about his writing suggests that, in subtle ways, he and his faith are "in the process of becoming something different" (DePalma 239).

Conclusion

My purpose here has been to understand the logic undergirding Justin's writing by naming the rhetorical form he appropriates and contextualizing it within Justin's experiences. In doing so, I have attempted to explain why Justin's writing wanders from academic discourse to Christian testimony, and that the abruptness of such transitions can be accounted for by reading his writing through a jeremiadic lens. DePalma calls on compositionists to "develop an understanding of how religious students' commitments inform their work" (239), and I have attempted to show here that one way to do so

is via knowledge of the jeremiad. With such knowledge, compositionists can approach writing like Justin's with "respect and openness" (239) and "respond more effectively" (Rand 350). Before offering suggestions as to how instructors might do so, I find it necessary to concede three points. First, Justin does seek to share his faith, and his writing—both drafts—features witnessing that would make many writing and literature instructors uncomfortable (Rand 359). Second, Justin appropriates a story about a Jewish character for Christian ends. Instead of engaging fully with the story to understand the experiences of people who are culturally, generationally, and religiously different from himself, Justin imposes his experiences on the text. Finally, it's possible that Justin's jeremiad might actually hinder his engagement with *Yekl*. Jeremiads allow for conservative progress at best and may limit development for writers like Justin. For all these reasons, it would be within the rights of instructors to deem academic writing like Justin's as inappropriate and ask the student to revise.

However, I can't help but wondering how Justin might have responded had Christine done so. Given Justin's identity crisis, such a response could have backfired; he might have perceived it as one more way whereby the secular university trivializes faith commitments (Rand 349–50). This conclusion would have followed all too well from the crisis Justin was then experiencing; he feared his "belief system" was isolating him from "the rest of [...] society," including his public university, which he described as "a setting that's not really catered to Christian ideals" (first interview). Sociologist Christian Smith has used the term *embattled* to describe how many evangelicals relate to American society, and that term applies to Justin when he wrote his first draft. Compositionists thus risk responding in a manner that prompts students like Justin to disengage, a scenario that plays itself out all too often in composition scholarship (Hunt's "Rob Campbell," Peters's African American student, and Montesano and Roen's "Charles" come to mind). But what about asking Justin to keep the jeremiad but remove the witnessing? After all, Rand reminds us that "'witnessing talk' is the kind of faith-centered discourse about which writing instructors complain most frequently" (359). Could Justin have leveraged the jeremiad's resources without witnessing? I think the answer

Could Justin have leveraged the jeremiad's resources without witnessing? I think the answer is no: removing witnessing from the jeremiad would strip the form of much of its rhetorical force.

is no: removing witnessing from the jeremiad would strip the form of much of its rhetorical force. As a rhetorical act, witnessing is as important for the rhetor as it is for the audience (Rand 359–60). Witnesses affirm their own faith and identity in the same moment that they attempt to prompt others to question their own. Without witnessing—without imagining an audience apart from himself, no matter how vague that audience may have been—Justin would not have been able to achieve spiritual agency to the extent he did. Overt witnessing may make writing and literature instructors uncomfortable, but perhaps that discomfort is worthwhile when working with students like Justin. Perhaps such witnessing, contrary to our negative perceptions of it, evidences engagement and even growth.

Of course, writing instructors also run the risk of not doing enough to challenge the thinking of students like Justin or push them to interact deeply with discourses other than their own. Mark Alan Williams refers to this perspective as *preservationism* and critiques it on the basis that it can hinder students from transforming their faith (359). I agree that preservationist attitudes can shield religiously committed students from difference in unproductive ways. As I noted earlier, I wish Christine had prompted Justin to think more deeply about the difference between his own evangelical Christianity and Yekl's Jewish ethnicity and faith, though I don't think she was attempting to preserve Justin's faith. At the same time, Justin's jeremiadic writing suggests that the dichotomy Williams establishes between preservation and progress may be unfounded. Because jeremiads entail recontextualizing core values into new situations, they change students' values or their relationships to those values. Consequently, jeremiads promote both preservation and change. And while the progress may be modest, enacting jeremiads seems to resonate with Williams's goal: they offer students like Justin "the opportunity to examine these relations [between their faith and other discourses] for themselves" (359).

Williams also suggests that while it is not the responsibility of instructors to "decide how students should relate to any of the dominant discourses in their lives," it is our responsibility to help them see how they might be drawing on, interpreting, and even constructing those discourses in their writing (359). I agree, and I close by offering suggestions compositionists and literature instructors can use to respond to student writing that features a jeremiad. When encountering jeremiads in student writing, instructors might first help students understand how the form emerges in their writ-

ing. They could do this by naming the three key moves of the jeremiad and pointing out how and where they show up in the student's draft. Given the pervasive nature of the jeremiad in American public and religious discourse, it's likely that students are unaware they are enacting it. This was the case with Justin. Such an introduction to the jeremiad thus would be crucial to helping students achieve a greater awareness of how they're enacting religious discourse in their writing. It would also be important to acknowledge to the student that rhetors often use jeremiads to make sense of confusing situations or crises. While instructors certainly need to be aware of how much information is appropriate to seek from students about their personal lives, knowing whether students are experiencing some form of crisis would be key to responding effectively. Because Justin directly incorporated his crisis in his writing, talking with him about the challenges he faced was easier than if he had only alluded to his struggles obliquely.

Instructors might then draw on the terminology of the jeremiad to encourage revision. Because remembrance arguably represents the overarching goal of the jeremiad, instructors might ask students to talk about what they hope to remember or return to via their jeremiad. This discussion could entail overt attention to the jeremiad as a form of epideictic. As such, instructors might ask students to talk about the values they seek to praise or acknowledge and those they seek to blame or disparage (Prelli). In doing so, students might arrive at a deeper understanding of their own values and beliefs, not only what they are but how they get enacted in writing. Instructors might also highlight the kinds of change or transformation that are inevitable when individuals seek to make sense of their current situation in terms of values they seek to remember. They might ask students to talk about the differences between their current situation and a time in the past when they felt like they were living out their beliefs in meaningful ways. Then instructors might ask students to talk about how enacting those values in the current situation might look different than in the past. If students resist this way of thinking, compositionists can cite Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric* to offer ordinary examples of how people realign themselves to core values on a regular basis—and how such realignments benefit society (119–22).

Such an understanding of the malleability of values and our relationships to them might help students hone their rhetorical awareness, particularly in terms of how the values and beliefs they assume might

work better for some audiences and not others. Instructors might prompt students to think about who shares a similar set of beliefs and how students might best communicate with them given the particular topic or issue. Such thinking could prompt students to do what Justin did and revise his essay for a like-minded audience—in his case, other Christian college students who might read *Yekl*. While writing for a like-minded audience should not supplant the goal of helping students write effectively across

Composition pedagogy places a premium on helping students develop rhetorical awareness, and it's clear that Justin developed this awareness in the process of revising his analysis of *Yekl*.

difference—I agree completely with Shannon Carter when she writes that “the function of the composition classroom” is “to enable [students] to speak to readers who do not” share

their perspectives (578), and I would add here that the same could be said of the literature classroom—Justin did make rhetorical gains when he was able to write for a particular audience he knew well in his second draft. While he wasn't sure to whom he was writing in his first draft, he clarified that issue dramatically in his revision. Perhaps more importantly, he was aware that he was writing for a specific audience. Composition pedagogy places a premium on helping students develop rhetorical awareness, and it's clear that Justin developed this awareness in the process of revising his analysis of *Yekl*.

Composition and literature instructors can also invent responses that directly feature terms or values derived from the logic of the jeremiad, a move that can be particularly useful when it comes to keeping engaged religiously committed students who might be experiencing spiritual or personal crisis. Toward this end, Christine's response is instructive. Even though she doesn't name the jeremiad specifically in her response, what she asks Justin to do is continue working with(in) the logic of its terms. When she writes, “The way you link your quest for identity to Yekl's is potentially very powerful,” Christine echoes two key terms associated with the jeremiad: *errand* and *unfulfillment*. Christine communicates that Justin's errand—the “quest for identity” he enacts through incorporation of a jeremiad into his academic writing—is worthwhile but hasn't yet achieved its fullest potential. As such, Christine urges Justin to continue working in the same vein and does so by enacting values similar to those implicit in the jeremiad. In epideictic fashion, Christine's comment acknowledges and values the

motives that shaped Justin's first draft. That's not to say she doesn't seek to redirect him or encourage transformation—she asks him to “pull these connections together into a focused argument or delve more deeply into their implications.” But she does so in a way that tacitly asks him to continue in the same direction, and by doing so she avoids intellectual violence and arguably keeps Justin engaged. He told me several times in our interviews that he felt supported and encouraged by Christine.

Finally, compositionists and literature instructors can highlight the notion of unfulfillment when talking with students who employ a jeremiad. Even in the resolution they offer—the return to the original promise—there's a sense of open-endedness and partiality in jeremiads. As religious discourse, jeremiads may constitute rhetorical forms aimed at pointing audiences and rhetors toward absolute truth, but they do so by underscoring the limitations of human actors. Jeremiads are temporal forms intended to help rhetors and audiences make sense of the messy, uncertain here-and-now. They position rhetors to see themselves as works in progress, as individuals who have room to grow, develop, and change, a subject position that, as I see it, is one that compositionists and literature instructors hope their students will come to inhabit. Asking students to think about how their faith tradition negotiates the tension between revealed truth and human believers' limitations to understand that truth might help students explore such complexities. By the same token, asking students to think about how their faith tradition reconciles faith preservation with the reality that faith, values, and beliefs are always undergoing some degree of change might help students see themselves in greater complexity (see Anderson; Ringer, *Vernacular*). They might, like Justin, come to the realization that Christianity and change are compatible, and that it's good to have one's beliefs challenged. Justin at least began to develop this openness by the end of his revision process. He seemed to do it on his own terms, by first struggling to preserve his faith via enactment of a jeremiad and then using that form to revise for a public audience. In the process, he transformed his relationship to his own values subtly but significantly.

Working with(in) the logic of the jeremiad at best might produce modest gains. But if we can appreciate such gains as incremental steps toward helping students develop greater rhetorical awareness—and if we can do so while respecting our religiously committed students' abilities to transform and preserve their faith simultaneously—then we all, compositionists and literature specialists alike, might find the energy we need to stay engaged.

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Notes

1. At Justin's request, I am using his real name.

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