

The Sacramental Poetics of Simone Weil

Simone Weil brings the perspective of the world religions to the problem of the interrelation between poetry and the sacred, in opposition to a chorus of modernist thinkers who view the interrelation of literature and religion from a philosophical or an anthropological point of view. Because Weil's worldview, including her poetics, rests on the outlook of the great religions, I will refer to Simone Weil throughout this book as a "traditionalist." The religious traditions assert the existence of a supernatural, as well as a natural, realm. Tradition (religion) constitutes a mediation between the two.¹

A voice distinct from other traditionalists in our century, Weil views the interplay between art and religion specifically through the lens of mystical Christian Platonism.² Simone Weil draws from this religious philosophy a new and compelling theory of sacred art, an idea which, in its essence, constitutes a theory of Christian tragedy. Hitherto, the debate concerning the possibility of harmonizing the Christian and the tragic visions of the world has lacked the underpinning of a theory of tragedy which is specifically Christian. From the perspective of the religious traditions, such a theory must furnish as artistic paradigm an act of the divine creation which tragic art might be said to imitate.³ I propose that the thought of Simone Weil supplies such a concept of the creation, as of religious art.

Weil's idea of Christian tragedy can become accessible only if one understands first both the Platonic and the mystical Christian dimensions of her underlying concept of religious art. This fact constitutes the rationale for the present chapter.

As suggested above, critics today tend to study the relationship between literature and religion from one of two fundamental perspectives: modern or traditional. Modernists discuss this interrelation outside of the context of any particular religious tradition, including the Judeo-Christian. They do so necessarily since they reject as untenable the foundation of all the greater (and the lesser) religions, the existence of a transempirical reality, a reality inaccessible to the faculties of sense. The modernist tends, therefore, to ground his idea concerning religion and literature in philosophy or in anthropology rather than in religion itself. A modernist may, for example, follow the lead of a contemporary philosopher, such as Martin Heidegger, who offers poetry as revelation of a god who is neither beyond nor separate from nor superior to the phenomenal world.⁴ Or in an anthropological rather than in a philosophical mode, a modernist may regard literature not as a substitute for traditional religion, as the Heideggerian critic does, but rather as a barometer, like the religions, of *Zeitgeist*. The anthropological or pragmatic critic regards the study of religious and literary texts as valuable for its ability to uncover and illuminate the value systems of diverse cultures.⁵

As I have suggested, the epistemological premise on which thinkers, like Simone Weil, rest their discussions of the commonality of literature and religion is that of the world religions. Thus, a belief in the existence of a supernatural reality undergirds Weil's view of the relationship between these two disciplines. For the traditionalist, such as Weil, ultimate reality is apprehended not through the senses, the only means to knowledge the empiricist admits as valid, but through a faculty known as "the eye of the heart" or "the eye of faith." This inner or third eye is described by those familiar with the esoteric or mystical dimension common to the great religions. The esoteric facet of religion is the secret or

hidden dimension from which supernatural knowledge is derived.⁶ Without the existence of this supernatural reality, phenomenal reality itself would neither be nor mean. The report of fundamental religious experience contained in scripture, and the continuing affirmation of mystical encounter, bear witness to the existence of a supernatural realm.⁷

From a traditional point of view, Simone Weil's insights into the mystical dimension of Christianity provide a sacralizing impetus to contemporary discussion of the relationship between literature and religion. This impetus, it would seem, has been sorely lacking in treatments of the subject, particularly in the United States.⁸ From her intimate experience of the mysteries of the Christian faith, in particular, Weil draws a view of art that is sacramental in a sense which goes contrary to modernist conceptions of so-called religious art. Weil's view of art is sacramental not in the Heideggerian, essentially romantic, sense of the word, redolent of a holiness "immanent" in all things empirical. According to the romantic view, the natural and the "supernatural" are identified: This identification simply brackets the problem of good and evil. Weil's view of art, on the other hand, is sacramental in the traditional sense of the term, furnishing a rare and special kind of mediation between a natural and a supernatural realm. This mediation is ordinarily understood in Western civilization as a bridging between man and God. A harmonizing principle is required precisely when a natural and a supernatural realm are regarded not as identical but rather as distinct realities. To romantic monistic philosophy, therefore, Simone Weil opposes a limited or mediated dualism, a philosophy compatible with the outlook of the religious traditions.⁹ A dualistic philosophy of this kind not only allows for but necessitates moral distinctions.

Weil, a Platonist, regards great art as performing an authentically religious function. Simone Weil follows Plato's conception when she proffers sacred art as a form of mediation between a natural and a supernatural realm. Weil's idea in this respect opposes the romantic immanentist notion of spiritual art, which, in opposition to the religious

traditions, makes no distinction between the divine and the human.¹⁰ As we shall shortly discuss, also in the vein of Plato, Weil soundly denounces the modern romantic litterateur who assumes a prophetic stance despite his skepticism regarding supernatural mystery as the religious traditions confess it. Weil continues in a Platonic mode when she opposes a reduction of religion or religious literature to a mere function of social reality, a cultural phenomenon, lacking an orientation toward the supernatural.

Although Weil is scarcely alone in her opposition to philosophical or secular discussions of the interrelation between literature and religion,¹¹ her particular import lies in her having developed, in the manner of Plato, a cosmogony which may serve as the model of a work of artistic creation which is spiritual in a traditionalist's sense. Weil's cosmogony is rooted in the central mystery of Christianity: the cross of Christ. Her particular idea of the creation as an act performed through the mediation of Christ's cross provides a model of artistic creativity which the tragic artist may be said implicitly to imitate. Thus, Weil's conception of the world's origins lays the foundations for a mystical theory of Christian tragedy.

For any traditionalist, of course, including Simone Weil, modernist, secular discussion concerning the religious quality of certain kinds of literature is of strictly limited value, if not positively harmful. The traditionalist asserts the primacy of religious truth, a truth which avows the unity and the supremacy of a Good which is absolute or eternal. She therefore regards the value of literature, as of all else, in light of that truth.¹² The modernist, on the other hand, does not accept the validity of sacred knowledge as the religious traditions confess it. He therefore tends to believe no significant boundaries between literature and religion exist. The modernist either places religious and literary texts side by side, as it were, on the same level of value, or he offers the one as a substitute for the other. The modernist thereby suggests that these two kinds of writing are not only of equal value but even interchangeable.

One of the most prolific and influential critics of religion and literature in America in recent years, Nathan Scott, may be taken as a suitable representative of one modernist orientation in the field, an orientation which may be called "romantic" or "aesthetic."¹³ In his mature work, Scott is concerned to emphasize the 'religious' approach to literature in opposition to structuralist and deconstructionist literary criticism. These latter, recent, tendencies in literary theory bring to a logical solipsistic or nihilistic conclusion the earlier tendency of the New Criticism to discuss a poetic text without relating it to the real world.¹⁴ In diametrical opposition to those who would subvert the relationship between poetic language and reality, Scott offers poetry as the only genuine means of understanding reality in its fullness and in its truth, that is, religiously.

Indeed, Scott suggests that the poet must substitute for the priest or prophet in the modern world. As a modernist, Scott believes that the perennial wisdom contained in the common thought of much of the theology and the philosophy of the past has become "ossified."¹⁵ Because it is dependent on a belief in supernatural reality, this body of so-called knowledge is untenable. It is useless to anyone who subscribes to the modern, predominantly empiricist, mentality. Scott suggests that the death of traditional religion does not signify the demise of the sacred dimension of human existence, however. The poet, he asserts, can now supply the means to a truer and gentler 'piety' than any orthodoxy could ever offer. The creative artist can teach a sense of 'enthralment' before the particular things of the world which an outworn and world-denying supernatural religion had only caused to go unnoticed, unappreciated.

In *The Poetics of Belief*, for example, Scott looks to several major nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers for support for his concept of the poet as prophet in the modern world. Each of these persons suggests, in some way, that the average human being lacks the poet's sensitivity to the enchantment or wonder of things and thus needs the poet in order to be awakened to the existence of the holy

in the world around him. (None of the persons Scott cites subscribes to a traditional religious vision, at least not in his most creative periods.)

Thus, Scott lauds these particular ideas regarding poets and poetry: (a) Samuel T. Coleridge's theory of the secondary imagination, according to which the poet possesses a unique capacity to renovate the world of everyday for the 'lay' person; (b) Matthew Arnold's belief that though, from a modern or scientific point of view, the tenets of the Christian faith are meaningless phraseology or *Aberglaube*, yet poetry, including biblical poetry, when considered as poetry alone, can in its own way 'name the holy'; (c) Walter Pater's urging that the layman learn from the Renaissance artist to burn always with a gemlike flame and to approach the world in an authentically spiritual manner, that is, in an all-embracing attitude of openness or *disponibilité*; (d) George Santayana's belief that since, according to the empiricist mentality, the realm of matter is the only possible object of reverence, the highest activity in life is the activity which poets do best, that is, in Whitmanesque phrase, to have business with the grass; (e) Wallace Stevens's assertion that the poet alone, because he can reach things in their pristine reality through a process of artistic 'decreation', can offer 'fresh spirituals' to a desacralized world; and, finally, (f) Martin Heidegger's idea that the poet is a shepherd of Being, a namer of the holy, teaching us, as no one else can, how to revel in the particularity of things.

At times, Scott can speak in an appealing way of the poet's special function. He talks charmingly of the poet as a person who, in Heideggerian terms, promotes an attitude of *Gelassenheit*, or letting be,¹⁶ before the things of the world. The poet's gentle regard for nature opposes a technological spirit of domination. And yet, despite the superficial appeal of his thought, it becomes quickly apparent that what Scott offers as a religious function for literature is actually a purely aesthetic one. What is lacking in each instance of 'poetic holiness' is a basis for a discrimination of values. From the point of view of the religious traditions, this lack

can only bespeak a religious vision which is false. No religion which omits an ethical content can be veritable.¹⁷

The replacement of human nature by physical nature as the locus of the holy, particularly, bespeaks an evasion of moral categories. The tendency to regard Nature, rather than the eye of faith or the eye of the heart, as the locus of spiritual encounter was first begun on a grand scale by the Romantic poets. Scott often looks to these writers for support for his premises.¹⁸ The Romantic holds up as an ideal an enthrallment before the things of the world without distinction. Comcomitantly, he infuses with charm the notion of *disponibilité* or openness before all the experiences of life. These aesthetic ideals may prove to be helpful for an artist who seeks to produce an appealing work of literature. However, to offer this attitude as a religion, as the basis for guiding human life and revealing ultimate truth, can legitimately be called an instance of sophistry. The romantic ideal is a principle which, if carried out, not simply in fiction but actually in life, results not in a spirit of reverence, as a critic like Scott maintains, but rather in nihilism.¹⁹ Moreover, a true devotion to the things of the world inevitably results in some process of discrimination and, therefore, in an attitude of commitment in some form. This disposition Scott's ideal of *disponibilité* or openness precludes.²⁰

Scott, however, scarcely stands alone when he offers as a religious what is in essence an aesthetic view of life. This proclivity may be seen as an instance of the confusion of religion with magic in literary circles which stems from the time of Romanticism. The tendency came to a height in European symbolism in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²¹ It is the lack of ethical discrimination which above all distinguishes a magical from an authentically religious orientation. These two attitudes can be mistaken for each other, however, because of a common concern with the "spiritual" or the "supernatural." Traditionalists themselves do not confuse the two concepts, for they, unlike the romantics, do not identify the natural

with the supernatural realm. Simone Weil is no exception, for, as we shall see, she articulates a view of spiritual art which, while claiming, like the romantic view, to be rooted in a vision of ultimate or spiritual truth, yet simultaneously holds the distinctions between good and evil at its core. This, in part, may explain her peculiar attraction to tragedy in the classical tradition, a tradition which consistently maintains a moral, and often supramoral, conception of human life.²² As future chapters will show, the classical tragic tradition itself modernist critics have "aestheticized" or "de-moralized."

Romantic modernists, then, allow aesthetics to impinge on the territory of religion, to the point of claiming the function of religion for itself. Other modernists place religion side by side with poetry, disallowing any tendency to subordinate the latter to the former. This is an attitude foreign to all the religious traditions.

This second kind of equalizing approach to the study of literature and religion may be called the "cultural" or "pragmatic." In this instance, not the enthralling or the beautiful but rather the social or the useful is offered as the chief value of human life and, therefore, as the barometer for all criticism of the relationship between literature and religion. Like Nathan Scott, Giles Gunn, for example, speaks of faith in the existence of a supernatural reality as being both outworn and untenable.²³ Gunn, a pragmatist, does not, like Scott, offer literature as a substitute for revealed religion (though he allows for the possibility of doing this). Gunn, rather, views the study of the relationship between religious and literary texts as a form of cultural studies. Gunn thus regards the unique capacities of both poetic and religious writings to reflect the value systems of various times and cultures as the source of their continued claim to attention in a post-Christian age.

For his ideas concerning the interrelation of religion and literature, Gunn draws not primarily on the immanentist and therefore essentially romantic premises on which Scott bases his own work; American pragmatism, rather, is the

source of his inspiration. Gunn follows consistently the pragmatic maxim that what works—that is, whatever helps one to adjust to his environment—is true: The meaning and truth of ideas is their cash value.²⁴ Thus, as Gunn himself points out, the pragmatist does not ask, What is real, as opposed to apparent? Nor does he ask, What is true, as opposed to false? The pragmatist asks, rather, What difference does it make to think one way or another about what is real or true?²⁵ The basis for this belief concerning what constitutes the appropriate philosophical question is a scientific outlook: skepticism concerning the ability to attain legitimately to any truth which is transempirical or transcultural in kind.

For Gunn, the pragmatist, then, religion is not a means of revealing eternal reality or perennial wisdom. Religion, rather, is a reflector and shaper of culture. The pragmatist assumes, as does any empiricist, that there is no reality which transcends the social or cultural sphere. Indeed, Gunn suggests there is general agreement among scholars who study both disciplines that the common point between literature and religion is that both are ‘makers of meaning.’ Thus, Gunn implies very clearly that the one subject is of no greater or lesser value than the other.²⁶

For Gunn, then—as, interestingly, for the sophist in the time of Socrates²⁷—there is no realm of authority that is not culturally derived.²⁸ There is only biosocial reality. Gunn insists that religion is only one cultural form among others.²⁹ On these grounds, any traditionalist who objects to this view (as she must) he accuses of “theological imperialism.”³⁰ In this critique of the traditionalist outlook, Gunn is consistent with the evolutionary perspective of the American pragmatist William James, for whom all facts of human existence as facts are of equal interest, including both religion and irreligion.³¹ As a further consequence of his pragmatic premise, then, Gunn claims that the proper subject of the critic of religion and literature is not only the rise of religion in a certain culture but, also, of equal interest, its subsequent decline. Not surprisingly, Gunn cites a scholarly study of

what he regards as the incipient demise or secularizing of Christianity in Romantic poetry as an example of the study of literature and religion at its best.³²

The pragmatic empiricist shares with the romantic the conviction that each religion is a passing phenomenon, a function of history. Though a religion fulfills a need at a certain time, it contains no eternal truth.³³ This relativist attitude toward religion undergirds, for example, Heidegger's idea of the holy, a notion Scott quotes approvingly. Heidegger looks to the Romantic poet Hölderlin for knowledge of the divine. From this poet, Heidegger—and, Heidegger believes, all of humanity—learns that the condition of the modern scientific world is a condition of spiritual dearth. The gods who once were believed in have disappeared, and new gods have yet to make themselves known. Thus, Heidegger speaks of "the No-more of the gods that have fled and the Not-yet of the god that is coming."³⁴ It is, apparently, this—essentially modern—concept of the spiritual as the creation of human history that explains Gunn's allusion to Christianity as something outworn, as "the same stale game."³⁵ Similarly, Gunn refers to the confining of the study of literature and religion to the Judeo-Christian tradition as provincialism. Predictably, based on his relativist premises, Gunn makes this latter objection without reference to, much less on behalf of, other religious traditions.³⁶

For Gunn, as for Scott, faith in a transempirical reality is something primitive.³⁷ Like Scott, however, Gunn also betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the great religions themselves. He does not do so by mistaking an aesthetic for a religious view of reality (except in passing), but he offers as a peculiarly modern mentality what is, in its deepest sense, traditional. Gunn suggests that religious experience for primitive man involved worship of what the primitive believed to be another realm. The enlightened modern man, on the other hand, regards the "transcendent" other not as another realm, not as a reality beyond the self, but rather as a mode of access to change within the self.³⁸ This statement unfortunately betrays a lack of knowledge.

For the traditionalist, ultimate reality is at one and the same time completely other and the heart of the self.³⁹ Far from lacking an interest in psychology, the traditions hold what is known as a "two-self" psychology. According to the traditional interpretation of human personality, an old self needs to die so that a new one can be born. This is the sole authentic route to inner peace, though it involves pain. Indeed, the whole idea of catharsis in literature may be, and has been, seen in these, essentially mystical, terms.⁴⁰ Simone Weil's own ideas on tragedy may serve as an important reminder of this fact.

Gunn, then, suggests that ordinary literature serves a religious end in itself rather than being subject to evaluation in the light of scriptural texts. Like the human being himself, literature, as religion, is a maker rather than a reflector of meaning. It is this shared capacity to create fictions that enable human beings to endure which puts literature and religion—that is, nonscriptural and scriptural texts—on the same level of value. The traditionalist, on the other hand, asserts that art is never something autonomous. The value of a literary work is always viewed in light of the ultimate reality revealed in scripture. Absolute reality only scripture describes as well as human language can describe it. On this central point, then, the pragmatic view of the relationship between religion and literature is at least in no danger of becoming confused with the traditional.

It is important to point out, however, that the romantic empiricist, like Scott, shares with the traditionalist the view that art, rather than being an end in itself, serves an end beyond itself. The romantic and the traditional approaches to the relationship between literature and religion need, therefore, to be clearly distinguished. A confusion between them, based on this shared point, is possible.

For Scott, as for the traditionalist, it is the purpose of poetry to reveal ultimate or spiritual reality. For Scott, however, the ultimate, or the holy, is wholly immanent in the things of the world. A special, a poetic, eye discerns its existence. Ultimate reality, for the traditionalist, however, is not

only immanent but transcendent as well, the transcendence being insisted upon.⁴¹ This dualistic view contradicts the monism of Scott or any immanentist going back to Schelling and Hegel. From a traditionalist perspective—and, indeed, from the point of view of any intelligent person—without a sacred reality transcendent to and distinct from the phenomenal world, it makes no sense to say that that reality dwells also in the world. Without the transcendent, there is nothing to be immanent, and one is left, as we see Scott is left, with simply a heightened way of talking about empirical reality itself. Thus, from a traditional perspective, though a poet may be able to attain knowledge of the holy, this poet must be not a poet only but a genuine mystic as well.

It is by means of the philosophical monism which underlies the romantic point of view that the aesthetic dimension of the human experience can and does become confused with the religious. This confusion, in turn, makes possible the idea that religion and literature, rather than retaining their own spheres and boundaries, are interchangeable. The romantic's particular way of using major terms, such as 'religion,' 'transcendent,'⁴² and 'sacramental,' perpetuates the problem.

According to the traditionalist outlook, in opposition to the romantic one, religious art performs the function of mediating between the transcendent or the sacred and the natural or the profane. Sacred art is "a revelation from that Reality which is the source of [the religious] tradition[s] and the cosmos; sacred art, then, has a sacramental function."⁴³ Fundamentally, sacred literature, specifically, then, is the poetry contained in the scriptures and religious myths themselves or poetry which otherwise reveals the mysterious, supernatural truths scripture and myth contain.⁴⁴ The romantic modern surrenders the concept of sacramentalism because he disbelieves in a transempirical reality. He therefore also disavows sacred knowledge and a mediating principle between the sacred and the profane. Unfortunately, while surrendering the concept of sacramentalism, he yet retains the term. According to Scott, for example, the entire

world is a "sacramental" universe; this sacramental aspect only the poet has the capacity to reveal.⁴⁵ For Scott, Pater's ideal of unconditional openness before the experiences of the world is a form of "sacramentalism."⁴⁶ And, again, for this critic, all created things are indwelt by grace and by holiness. Scott speaks of the power of the "sacramental" principle within Christianity itself to break down all partitions between the sacred and the quotidian.⁴⁷

What Scott offers as a religious principle here is not simply an aesthetic but also an atheistic principle. This is perhaps nowhere made clearer than in the similarity between Scott's use of the term *sacrament* and the use made of this word by Ludwig Feuerbach, the famous pupil of Hegel who is credited with being the first major philosopher to collapse theology into anthropology. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach utters a common atheistic cry that a No to God is a Yes to man. Yet he couches this idea in terms which are themselves religious. In the section to which I refer, Feuerbach alludes apparently to the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, a sacrament which commemorates the redeeming act of the crucifixion.⁴⁸ This religious mystery Feuerbach, a materialist philosopher, must wholly reject. Yet Feuerbach asserts, "Water, bread and wine are by their very nature sacraments....Therefore let bread be sacred for us, let wine be sacred, and also let water be sacred. Amen!"⁴⁹ The traditional (and original) idea of sacrament stands in diametrical opposition to this modernist sense that everything belonging to the world of man, because it belongs to man, is holy or sacramental. Indeed, for a materialist, like Feuerbach, everything human is more "holy" and more "sacramental" the more completely man is thought to have created God and not the other way around.

From a traditionalist viewpoint, a sacrament is that which mediates the presence and the power of the divine.⁵⁰ Far from being an expression of the entire human experience, a sacrament is a means by which the Christian may turn from the pressing distractions of the things of creation and the structures of society toward a dimension of his experience

which is supreme though hidden. A sacrament mediates the presence and the redeeming power of Christ.⁵¹ Sacraments are the particular means, within Christianity, whereby the supernatural may touch the natural realm, acting as a function of divine grace.⁵² For Simone Weil, herself, as for any authentic Christian, a sacrament is a means of making real contact between the soul and God (*GTG*, 58). Unless the sacred is perceived, as it is perceived in the religious traditions, to be transcendent in essence, the idea of making contact with the transcendent, the idea of having both the need for, and the possibility of procuring, special ways of knowing and communicating with the divine becomes an irrelevancy. For this reason, in instances where the sacred is not regarded as transcendent, it would seem that, from the point of view of the religious traditions, certainly, the word "sacrament" should not be used. When it is used in such an instance, the effect is to give an air of religiousness to something which is in fact atheistic.

When, then, the traditionalist speaks of sacred art as serving a sacramental function, she means that art of this kind is a means, through the knowledge it conveys, of putting a person into contact with supernatural or sacred reality. This reality the Western mind understands as God. The sacramental function of art, from a modernist perspective, really has no meaning. Talk of this kind serves the purpose of lending a certain air of importance to art—a kind of defense mechanism, perhaps, in a scientific culture—and even again a sense of religiousness to something which is, in fact, atheistic.

As a traditionalist, Simone Weil holds art in less high a regard than Scott, who views art as a happy replacement for religion. She also esteems art to a lesser degree than Gunn, who contends that art serves a function equivalent in kind and quality to that of religion. In this attitude Weil closely follows Plato, a thinker whom traditionalists call their own⁵³ and whose concept of sacred art may serve, generally, as an example of the traditionalist conception in opposition to the modern. Since Plato's theory of art contains the seeds of

Weil's own ideas on the subject, a discussion of Plato's views will serve a double purpose of contrasting the modern with the traditional position and serving as a propaedeutic for Weil's own contribution to the discussion regarding the interrelation between religion and literature.

From a traditional perspective, Plato's is not simply a human philosophy but the result of divine inspiration.⁵⁴ From this viewpoint, whenever there is a revival of Plato, there is hope for the rediscovery of sacred knowledge.⁵⁵ When Plato's thought is restored in conjunction with the Christian message, the suprarational or mystical, the essential or original, elements of Christianity have a chance to be reborn.⁵⁶

Plato regards all matters from a supernatural perspective. He views art with suspicion, therefore, because art imitates the phenomenal world. Already, then, it becomes apparent that, from a Platonic perspective, art will not be regarded as existing on the same level of value as religion. Art tends to fasten a person's attention and his affections onto the things of the world rather than to detach him from them. Thus, art obstructs the path to knowledge of a deeper and truer reality than the physical world outside, that is, knowledge of the spiritual kingdom both beyond and within.⁵⁷ For Plato, therefore, art is apt to hinder, rather than to help, a human being's quest both for ultimate knowledge and for inner freedom. The soul's search for the absolute, as described symbolically in Plato's allegory of the cave,⁵⁸ entails a tearing away from the things of sense, a demolishing of one's material—including, often, materialistic—values and a movement toward that which alone is real or eternal. This pulling away, this moving away from illusion toward a knowledge of what is true, identified by Plato with what is good and what is beautiful, requires effort of a moral kind. For Plato, only that rare art form which attracts the soul away from the ephemeral, the temporal, and toward the Absolute can be called great art.⁵⁹

It is on essentially religious grounds, then, that Plato fears the artist, the copier of the phenomenal world. As Weil

herself points out, Plato opposed contemporary artists because he believed they imitated only the transitory world (*NB*, 372). The artist, who always enjoys a certain prestige and who rarely possesses authentic religious or mystical knowledge, can lead his audiences away from the path of enlightenment by deceiving them with regard to what is ultimately real.⁶⁰ Plato's famous rejection of art⁶¹—a reluctant rejection, a reluctance inspired by a very real susceptibility to poetic charm—reflects an authentically spiritual attitude.

For Plato, a spiritual vision is won only with great difficulty. A process of education or conversion is necessary to turn the soul toward the supernatural. This painful process is required because the greater part of man is rooted in physical or natural reality. Despite his respect for the capacity of physical beauty to act as catalyst to spiritual growth,⁶² Plato is skeptical regarding the spiritual value of beauty or charm in art. And yet, as that insightful twentieth-century Platonist, Iris Murdoch, has suggested, it can be said that in the *Timaeus*, the dialogue in which Plato attempts mythically to describe the creation of the world, Plato himself offers, if only implicitly, a positive model of artistic creativity.⁶³ As we shall see, Weil herself draws a theory of Platonic, Christian art from this particular dialogue.

Murdoch's claim concerning the artistic significance of Plato's *Timaeus* is a reasonable one, for, in all cultures past and present, cosmogonic myths provide the basis for any creative act,⁶⁴ including acts of artistic creativity. Indeed, from the point of view of the world religions, it is important that the artist model his work after that of the divine artificer. In this sense, perhaps, one may legitimately draw from Plato's description of the world's origin a positive theory of art to complement the negative view which we have based primarily on Plato's famous rejection of art in the *Republic*. As we will see, Weil follows Plato both in his negative assessment of the vast majority of artistic production and in his high regard (implicit, it is true, for Plato) for a certain rare and limited kind which models itself after the order of the world which was established by God at the time of creation.

This latter kind of art alone reveals rather than conceals ultimate or supernatural reality. Again, then, from a Platonic perspective, an artistic text must be evaluated in the light of values exterior and superior to it, values whose origins are supernatural.

Weil's own concept of the creation follows Plato's dialogue, the *Timaeus*, in important ways. Unlike Plato, however, and in accordance with the traditional Christian idea, Weil conceives of the creation as an act *ex nihilo* (from nothing). The *Timaeus* itself is a description of creation from chaos rather than *ex nihilo*. In this dialogue, therefore, the creator—the Demiurge or God—is not all-powerful, though he is all-good. In the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge, motivated by love of the Absolute Good, seeks to impose order on chaos or necessity, an irrational force indifferent to the good. In the act of creation, God persuades the brute force with which he is confronted toward the good, though he does so without changing the essential nature of necessity, which cannot be changed.⁶⁵ When necessity is persuaded toward the good, it is likewise persuaded toward the beautiful.⁶⁶ Also, neither the good (the divine) nor, therefore, the beautiful can be known except through knowledge of the necessary.⁶⁷

This simple description of the creation of the world may then be viewed as a paradigm of artistic creativity. In keeping with the traditional concept of art as a reflection of the cosmic order,⁶⁸ good art, then, from a Platonic perspective, specifically, will reflect the order of the world as a double function of the necessary and the Good. Good art mirrors the natural and the supernatural, the former in a relationship of willing subordination to the latter. If, for Plato, the best art will reflect the order of the world in its totality and in its truth, then—taking his description of the creation of the world as an artistic paradigm—the subject matter of art includes not only physical nature but human nature as well. Both are works of the divine creation, a double function of the necessary and the Good from the origins of the world. The Good, however, will be revealed only through the necessary, although necessity is itself indifferent to the good. Inferior art, contrarily,

will portray earthly existence without attention to the harsh facts of necessity or without an overriding vision of the Good. Rather than attending outward to things as they are, to the harsh conditions which define human existence—such conditions as mortality, suffering, and evil—the bad artist will build a world out of his own imaginings, wishes, or dreams and call it a picture of life. By failing to attend to the metallic hardness of necessity, a force to which every human being is subject against his hopes, he will never attain to knowledge of the deepest reality. The really real is not something cruel and natural—this describes necessity only—but, rather, supernatural and good. The profoundest reality is an absolute good toward which all things necessary tend.

Any kind of bad art, for Plato, will fail to do justice to, will fail to take properly and fairly into account, the objective, essentially harsh, order of things outside the self, that is, necessity itself. From an anachronistic perspective, this would include romantic and symbolist poetry, for example, when it offers (as it often, though not always, does offer) subjective or solipsistic ventures as discoveries of ultimate truth.⁶⁹

Iris Murdoch helpfully uses the imagery Plato himself employs in the allegory of the cave to describe inadequate artistry as Plato might see it. These distinctions will help us to view modernist poetics, romantic and pragmatic, from a Platonic perspective.

Murdoch refers in the following passage to the prisoner chained in front of the fire who sees before him only the shadows of the objects passing behind and which he mistakes for the objects themselves, and also to the prisoner who has been freed and has turned to see the objects parading behind the fire, understanding the shadows now for the phantoms they actually are. Both of these cave dwellers, however, are completely unaware of ultimate reality, which exists outside the cave altogether: the realm of earth, sun, and water.

"The bad artist," Murdoch says, "...sees only moving shadows and construes the world in accordance with the

easy unresisted mechanical causality of his personal dream life....The mediocre artist (the ironical man by the fire, if we may so characterize him), who thinks he 'knows himself but too well,' parades his mockery and spleen as a despairing dramatic rejection of any serious or just attempt to discern real order at all....Neither of these, as artist or as man, possesses...a just grasp of the hardness of the material which resists him, the necessity, the *anangke* of the world."⁷⁰ For Murdoch, in its way, each kind of art, the bad and the mediocre, is a lie about the way things are and therefore a stumbling block to man's knowledge about himself. Simply put, poor art ignores the central role of necessity in human life, the central import of suffering and evil. Inadequate art also fails to describe the existence of an absolute good (the world above the cave), a good which can be known only by means of the necessary.

Implicit already in this Platonic idea of bad and mediocre art we see a traditionalist critique of the modernist approaches to the interrelation of art and religion represented in this chapter by Nathan Scott and Giles Gunn. From the Platonic perspective, the romantic and pragmatic approaches to religious art falsify both art and religion by failing to seek ultimate meaning in the actual order of things. The romantic literary theorist, first, betrays reality. He does so by basing his view of art on physical Nature, to the exclusion of human nature. He thereby omits all serious consideration of the necessary, the hard facts of suffering and evil. Yet this is an art he calls religious in kind. His religion, omitting from view the problematic dimensions of human existence, is really nothing higher than the product of his own fantasy, a fulfillment of puerile wishes.

The pragmatic literary critic betrays the order of things by giving up as an impossibility the search for ultimate meaning at all. All attempts at an explanation of human existence are the product of fantasy. Individual societies, temporal realities, produce working fictions to help them endure. "Universal" problems such as suffering or evil are not contemplated. Yet, relativist premises do not stop the

pragmatist from employing the word *religion*. Yet religion this modernist regards, simply, as one of the fictions with which societies strengthen themselves against adversity.

Plato's own view of religious art may be called authentic rather than sophistical. Platonic art is devoted to uncovering the ultimate truth about what is real. The truth, if courageously pursued to the limits of the necessary, will be discovered to contain a dimension which transcends empirical reality. If suffering and evil are encountered in their purity and in their truth, a sphere which transcends them both will be discovered: a realm both absolute and good. The Platonic literary critic, then, is symbolized by the courageous prisoner in the cave who painfully faces first the light of the fire and, subsequently, the blaze of the sun outside the cave.

Simone Weil not only describes but she offers an explanation for the existence of the romantic and the pragmatic approaches to the interrelation between literature and religion. Both views simultaneously assert a respect for religion and maintain premises actually antireligious. In a Platonic vein, Weil views inadequate artistry from an authentically religious perspective, one that affirms a natural and a supernatural realm mediated by a confrontation with necessity.

The outlooks we have termed "modernist" derive, Weil believes, from a desire to avoid the very problem which is the focal point of any good work of literature. The "romantic" and the "pragmatist" seek to escape an upsetting issue in terms of which all worldviews and, therefore, all theories of art, may in one way or another be explained. This disturbing problem constitutes a conflict between two contradictory forces, the existence of which the human being, in his uneducated or unconverted aspect, finds unbearable. The two opposing forces with which, according to Weil, every human being must in some way cope, and which he will do almost anything to escape facing, are good and evil.⁷¹ According to Weil, the severely disturbing quality of the moral dimension of human existence causes many thinkers, at least in the modern period, simply to evade or deny its existence. This accounts for those who interpret life in the vein, respectively,