

Chapter 1

Introduction

The ancient Greek muses were the divine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, goddess of memory. As daughters of the master god, they were themselves masters of the arts and sciences. But Mnemosyne's gifts surface more ambiguously in the muses' nature. Like their half brother Apollo, who as consummate healer had also the power to harm, the muses, as aids to memory, were also agents of forgetfulness. Part of the point of the epic recitations, themselves feats of memory, that the muses inspired in ancient Greek poets was to so vivify a mythic past that listeners forgot the troubles of the present.¹

At just this juncture Judaism and Christianity raise their voices in protest against the muses. These religions understand themselves to reveal truths that sharpen attention to the present. The memory of the past does not so much eclipse the present as infuse it with meaning. If the muses were artists of forgetfulness, then from either a Jewish or Christian standpoint the products they inspired—epic and lyric poetry, comic and tragic drama—are merely tools of escape from the serious business of living in history-making time. The point of remembering history, from a Judeo-Christian standpoint, is to participate in the further making of it, not withdraw from it. And so the mere invocation of the muse already challenges monotheism's historic life in time and incites the religious critique of literature sometimes heard, that stories, poems, and plays are simply frivolous diversions from the serious business of life.

Judaism and Christianity are not casual or arbitrary representatives of the religious voice in the quarrel beginning to unfold before us between Western religion and literature. Christianity has been the dominant religion of the West for 2,000 years. And as Judaism is its ground, the two religions are natural partners in the critiques they issue of the arts. That they are monotheisms binds them in a further united front against Western literature, for if the goddesses of memory become agents of forgetfulness then these are figures that drive simultaneously in two opposed directions, a self-divided movement they share with other gods that supplies the root meaning of ambiguity (from the Latin: amb + agere). The paragon patrons of the arts are radically ambiguous, but as the muses also personified the arts, they infect the arts with the same radical ambiguity. Monotheism again protests, this time from the roots of its being. For by the mono- of monotheism in which Judaism and Christianity together participate, neither religion can rest easily with ambiguity. Where the ideals of literature incorporate and even celebrate ambiguity, the monotheistic ideal is univocity: speaking in one voice, at least on the central issues of faith and practice.

Of course, the broadest category Judaism and Christianity together share is religion. And here too a division from literature springs up from the root, for on at least one etymological reading of the word, "religion" descends from re-legere: to reread. This is a fitting etymology for the literary religions of Judaism and Christianity, which do indeed incessantly reread their own sacred texts in both public and private settings. By contrast, one of the marks of literature, insofar as it participates in the larger category of the arts, is that each new manifestation of it is understood as new and original. Literature might be defined as the collective body of linguistic products of the creative imagination.² The imagination would not be imaginative if it simply repeated and reread the old, whereas monotheistic religion positively turns on ritual repetitions of the old that come to define tradition. So once again, monotheistic religion and ambiguous literature point in opposite directions.

The dispute between religion and literature had an early theorist, outside of Judaism and Christianity altogether, in Plato, who wrote about "the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry."³ Plato casts literature's opponent as philosophy, but philosophy in his hands is not so very different from religion in ours. Plato's philosophers are myth-makers. They critique the stories of the gods inherited from the Greek

poets and substitute new stories of their own. Philosophers also legislate as much as Moses did. In his late dialogue *The Laws*, Plato contrasts the philosophical legislator, who “must give not two rules about the same thing, but one only,” to the poet, who “is often compelled to represent men of opposite dispositions, and thus to contradict himself.”⁴ Plato’s evident preference for the single-mindedness of the philosopher over the double-mindedness of the poet allies him with Judaism and Christianity in their dispute with literature over the relative merits of univocity and ambiguity. Platonic religion is not revelational in the way the monotheisms are. The highest object of desire, for Plato, is an idea that human reason ascends to contemplate, as opposed to the god of Judaism and Christianity, who descends to encounters with earthly human beings. And Platonism, unlike monotheism, does not typically found communities of worship. Platonic religion is more a sensibility than a communal structure, but that has not lessened its impact on Western culture, nor does it disqualify it from playing a religious third to Judaism and Christianity, which it often has inflected toward its own characteristic ideals. What further allies it with the monotheisms in their quarrel with literature is the nature of Plato’s own opponent in the Greek religious world of the fifth century BCE. Plato did not openly object to the civic religion of the times, which turned on temple sacrifice to the patron deities of the Greek city-states, nor to the mystery cults that initiated followers into intimate relations with the gods. On the contrary, *The Laws* provides for polytheistic temple worship, and Plato’s own mysticism of ideas has been likened to the ecstatic experience sought by the Eleusian and Orphic adepts.⁵ The strand within the multiple levels of ancient Greek religion that Plato contested was the distinctly literary one: the Homeric strand of epic stories of gods and heroes, and its descendants in the tragic dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Plato so distrusted the literary expression of religion that in one of his own dramatic gestures, in the middle dialogue, *The Republic*, he famously and notoriously banished poets from his ideal state. Plato, having defined a religious sensibility of his own, distinct from the polytheistic mythology of his inheritance, focused his critique of that mythology not on its cultic expressions but precisely on its poetic renderings, so much so that the quarrel between Plato and his inheritance is not so much between one type of religion and another as between one type of religion and literature.

But then we have a threefold front of religion, comprising Judaism, Christianity, and Plato. These are distinct currents in Western religious history that nonetheless overlap and borrow from each other. Conceived in contrast with Western literary history, their loosely united front is against a body of imaginative works that extends from Homer to the modern age. In the chapters that follow, Jewish, Christian, and Platonic texts voice a complex religious sensibility in contrast to a literary one, represented by selections from the Western literary canon. Our themes of comparison and contrast divide into three natural groups: first, a divisive grouping of mutual critiques that the religious and literary voices have issued of each other; second, a more harmonious grouping of analogous relations between the two suggested by three features of an artwork: its creation, beauty, and appreciation; and third, a grouping, alternatively divisive and harmonious, of religious and literary voices speaking to an interlocking series of perennial themes: love, death, evil, suffering, forgiveness, and saintliness.

The ancient and modern worlds supply most of our voices, because it is just in those eras that religion and literature speak so distinctively from each other. In the Christendom of medieval Western Europe, religion breathed through so much of culture that literature, with some notable exceptions, did not sound out distinctively enough to make a contrast. Indeed, so intertwined were the medieval voices of religion and literature that it took a new genre of literature to mark the break with a past so dominated by religion. And that genre, as though seeking to carry through history the novelty of its break with the past, we call the “novel.”

If the Hungarian literary critic, George Lukacs, was right about the novel, that it is “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God,”⁶ then novels mark the site of a particularly stark departure of literature from religion. Implicit in Lukacs’s famous claim is that part of what defined the epic, in its ancient and medieval form, was precisely the presence of God or gods. The novel proclaims its novelty just by absenting that presence. Of course, by the time of our own reading lives, novels are no longer novel, but they were some 400 years ago, when, by a consensus of reckoning, the first one, *Don Quixote*, appeared in the west.⁷

Certainly on the surface *Don Quixote* fashions not so much a world without God as a world without chivalry, the arts of medieval romance that focus this novel by their simultaneous absence from the real world

of the story and centering presence in the fantasies of the don. This novel self-consciously locates itself in a postchivalrous age—Cervantes' and Don Quixote's own time. Cervantes doubly distances the world of Don Quixote's fancy, for that world belongs not so much to the historical past that precedes the novel's time as to the fantastic literature of that earlier time, which itself never portrayed the real world, even of the Middle Ages. The literature of fantasy is not only the foil of the priest, who burns the don's books on chivalry, but of Cervantes too. It is against the backdrop of the medieval, secular literature of fantasy, which according to later typologies of literature would be called the "romance," that Cervantes fashioned what those same typologies would call the "novel." The novel, in the form of *Don Quixote*, rejects the romance with so much verve that we hardly notice how much, in the process, religion is simply eclipsed. It fades not so much from being defeated, or having its books burned, as from being denied the vocabulary in which it formerly expressed itself. One of the chief representatives of grounded this-worldliness in Cervantes' novel is a priest. Between the otherworld of chivalry and the no-nonsensical this-worldliness of the priest, religion's putative representative in the novel, actual religion loses any means of self-expression at all. It can identify neither with the delusive otherworldliness of the don nor the untranscendental pragmatism of the priest. But Cervantes gives religion no other alternatives, and so it is simply silenced. This silence of religion in literature Cervantes bequeathed to succeeding novelists.

But religion is irrepressible. For a reading of Cervantes' novel developed according to which Don Quixote himself mediates the religious voice.⁸ This reading teaches that he is the comic result of transporting a definitively antique figure, namely Christ, into the modern age. And this indirect reentry of religion into a literary work from which it had seemed to be banished becomes a parallel legacy of Cervantes, or at least of his interpreters. Later novelists may have fashioned worlds without God, but their works are not always without religious feeling, sensibility, or interpretability.

Six novels that lend themselves to religious interpretation concretize the abstractions in which we have up until now been hovering. They are *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne; *Sons and Lovers* (1913) by D. H. Lawrence; *The Bulwark* (1946) by Theodore Dreiser; *Eustace and Hilda* (1944–1947) by L. P. Hartley; *Anna Karenina* (1877) by Leo Tolstoy, and *The Idiot* (1868) by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Bound by a single century (1850–1950), these novels speak to us from a variety of other times. The otherness of the periods that gave rise to them may serve our goal of awakening, for purposes of study, the otherness of feeling that at least partially constitutes religious experience. Only two of the novels—*The Scarlet Letter* and *The Bulwark*—foreground the religious backdrop of their settings. But this only shows how little the literary mediation of religious sensibility requires the explicit display of either doctrines or practices from institutional religion. As one critic observes about moments of religious epiphany in novels: “Our understanding of religious belief must be revised; for the forms of belief, desire and dread we so often encounter in such moments of epiphany are at the furthest remove from any set of dogmatic propositions.”⁹

All of our selected novelists were raised in Christian traditions: Hawthorne and Lawrence in Congregationalism; L. P. Hartley in Methodism, though he later became a nominal Anglican; Dreiser in Catholicism; Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in the Russian Orthodox Church. As mature artists, all of these writers, except Dostoevsky, referred to aspects of institutional religion in tones that ranged from indifference to hostility. Dreiser and Lawrence wrote novels that were placed on the Catholic Church’s Index of Prohibited Books. But that is not to say that these writers lacked a religious sensibility of their own. Ever since the so intimately interrelated periods of Enlightenment and Romanticism, two channels of religious feeling emerged to compete with the doctrine and liturgy of the institutional church: (Enlightenment) ethics and (Romantic) nature. And in very broad strokes, Hawthorne, Hartley, and Tolstoy take their place among the religious ethicists and Lawrence and Dreiser among the religious naturalists. Let us consider what each of these writers has to teach us about the relation between religion and literature.

HAWTHORNE AND THE LITERARY IDEAL OF AMBIGUITY

It is not that religious texts are not also ambiguous, but the weightiest texts of Jewish and Christian history, the ones that determine religious life—the creeds and confessions for Christians, halacha for Jews—do

strive for univocal clarity. If later interpreters find ambiguous meanings in these texts, then it is largely for the purpose of resolving them. Creeds and laws proclaim by their very form their aspiration to univocality. Literature, in contrast, which lacks the same life-determining mission, is free to weave multiple meanings into its narratives and even celebrate their cross-purposes. If we are seeking a literary illustration of sustained ambiguity that chastens the Christian hope to speak univocally, then we can probably do no better than Hawthorne, whom one critic called a master of “magnificent hedging.”¹⁰ Hawthorne’s own spiritual biography is ambiguous. The New England congregationalism of Hawthorne’s day was divided between Calvinist and Unitarian theology. Adding to the conflicting crosscurrents was transcendentalism, a literary pantheism inspired by German philosophical idealism that, like Emerson, its most famous proponent, broke with the Church entirely. Hawthorne did not explicitly ally with any of these trends. As a backdrop to his literary probings of the darker recesses of the human soul, Calvinism served his artistic purposes, but it was too weighted with unnecessary doctrinal baggage and a heritage of oppression that Hawthorne himself felt acutely (as he confesses in the preamble to *The Scarlet Letter*, with regard to his witch-burning Puritan ancestors) to figure believably in his own religious life. On the other hand, transcendentalism and Unitarianism too readily suppressed anything that compromised their sunny moral psychology. Hawthorne attended no church as an adult. He seemed to hover iconoclastically between the instituted faith options of his time.

Hawthorne’s religious ambiguities have social and historical roots beyond his own personal life. He descended from seventeenth-century Puritan theocrats, but he was born in 1804, the first year of the second term in the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, a figure so un-Puritan that he rewrote the New Testament to purge it of miracle and harmonize it with enlightened moral reason. Hawthorne set *The Scarlet Letter* in colonial Puritan Boston, but the narrative voice of the story betrays sympathies with the moral reason that the Founding Fathers only a generation or two before him idealized. It is just from the standpoint of reasonableness that the Puritans in Hawthorne’s novel can appear as cruel and gullible as they do. But at least one Puritan idea escapes censure by the enlightenment sensibility of the narrator, and so projects itself into the tone of the novel that the narrative voice reads ambiguously, poised indecisively between seventeenth- and nineteenth-century

worldviews—that inner, moral states of soul, in obedience to a supernatural moral law, inevitably manifest externally.

It was Max Weber, in his now-classic *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,¹¹ who first popularized the idea that Calvinism provided a motivating theology for capitalism. His thesis was that Calvinist theories of predestination raised an anxiety over future salvation that necessitated a further, compensatory teaching, that a sign in this life of salvation in the next was a gainfully productive activity in Christian society. This in turn encouraged Christians to succeed in their work in just the ways that sustained a capitalist economy. Economic success was the this-worldly assurance of future salvation. Scholars of Calvinism do not find in Calvin himself any such doctrines of salvation's assurance. Calvin's own aim in preaching predestination was to restore the transcendent majesty of God after centuries of Catholic teaching about, for example, the mediation of the saints, had, in his judgment, compromised it. Nonetheless, Calvin did subscribe more fully than his sixteenth-century Reforming colleagues to a theory of vocation, or calling, that linked the inner predispositions of each human being to some form of gainful and productive work in Christian society. Calvin's successors, including the Puritans, did develop theories of salvation's assurance that invite Weber's interpretation. The notion that inner states of soul, especially the bad ones, bleed through to the surface of the body—an outward moving inwardness—was the quasi-Calvinist idea¹² that flourished so artistically at Hawthorne's hand.

This idea furnished the form of Hawthorne's novel, but Hawthorne parted from the Puritans over the specific contents of the idea, that is, over the actual inner evils that were powerful enough to bleed through to the surface of the body. The narrator shows little sympathy for the Puritans' collective, unquestioning outrage over Hester's adultery. He suggests that in satisfying the one biblical mandate, to punish adultery, the Puritan townsfolk violate another, against following a multitude to do evil (Exodus 23:2), as they do when they act in mass to ostracize Hester. Hawthorne recalibrated the Puritan scale of sinfulness so that in the deadly spot where the biblical sin of adultery once weighed so heavily, malicious cruelty now showed.¹³

Time and again in the novel, Hawthorne plays a moral-supernaturalist form of explaining outward appearance against its enlightened, naturalistic counterpart. Perhaps the most famous instance is Dimmes-

dale's death scene, where a scarlet letter appears to horrified spectators as though branded on his chest. The narrator commends to the reader both naturalistic and supernaturalistic interpretations of that manifestation, without deciding between them. Dimmesdale is framed by such ambiguous allusions, for another, less often noticed one occurs at his moment of introduction. After giving a brief physical description of the minister, the narrator comments, "Notwithstanding his high native gifts and scholarlike attainments, there was an air about this young minister . . . as of a being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence."¹⁴ The passage is not so much ambiguous as deceptively innocent (like Dimmesdale himself). It seems merely to register about Dimmesdale what many believe to be true of scholars generally, that because their heads are lost in the clouds, their feet are lost on the world's human paths. This would be a reasonable interpretation of the minister's demeanor of estrangement, but that could be the meaning of the sentence only if the subordinate clause that opens it began with "Because of." The "Notwithstanding" suggests that the minister's appearance of being lost is at odds with his scholarly attainments. The dissonance concealed in the "Notwithstanding" opens up beneath it onto that dark Puritan belief in the outward moving inwardness. Arthur's appearance of being lost cannot owe to his scholarly attainments, for these, as his assurance of salvation, would work to integrate him further into Puritan society, not alienate him from it. If Arthur appears lost, then something decidedly wayward inside of him is causing that outward impression. In Arthur's debut, as at his death, he hovers ambiguously between opposed interpretations of the appearance he makes.

This is the ambiguity that justifies the often-forgotten subtitle of *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*. It is not the muted love interest between Arthur and Hester that makes the book a romance, but its supernaturalism, which harks back to that very same tendency that Cervantes parodied in *Don Quixote*. Already in Hawthorne's day it was understood that novels simulated reality; in contrast, romance was the genre of fantasy. Hawthorne inherited enough of Cervantes' skepticism toward romantic fantasy that he could only portray it as one of two intertwined threads, the other of which—the enlightenment one—worked against it. The simultaneous driving in opposite directions makes his novel a literal model of ambiguity.

D. H. LAWRENCE AND THE LITERARY CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

What ambiguity implies when it is raised to the level of an ideal is that truth is less a static fact, waiting to be captured in doctrine, than a movement that vibrates elusively between the poles of opposites. Creeds and laws inevitably freeze the movement and so just as inevitably distort the truth. In this way, *The Scarlet Letter* indirectly critiques both the Puritans and the Enlightenment for presuming to formulate truth as doctrine. But far more direct rebukes of religious doctrine occur in other writers, perhaps in no other twentieth-century writer as forcefully as in D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence shares with Hawthorne the same religious roots in Congregationalism, and analyses of Lawrence analogous to those of Hawthorne, that trace themes and emphases of his novels back to Puritanism, have been written.¹⁵ But Lawrence was more direct about rejecting Christianity, as when he wrote, "By the time I was sixteen I had criticized and got over the Christian dogma."¹⁶ Whatever specific dogmas Lawrence had gotten over at sixteen, the Christianity he was rejecting in his late twenties, when *Sons and Lovers* was published, is clear from the letter he has the hero of that novel, Paul Morel, send his girlfriend, Miriam Lievers, by way of breaking off their intense romantic friendship:

See, you are a nun. I have given you what I would give a holy nun—as a mystic monk to a mystic nun. In all our relations no body ever enters. I do not talk to you through the senses—rather through the spirit. Ours is not an everyday affection. As yet we are mortal, to live side by side with one another would be dreadful, for with you I cannot long be trivial, and to be always beyond this mortal state would be to lose it. If people marry, they must live together as affectionate humans who may be commonplace with each other without feeling awkward—not as two souls. So I feel it.¹⁷

Lawrence identified Christianity with disembodied love. Miriam Lievers, who represents that love in the novel, "knew that one should be religious in everything. . . . All the life of Miriam's body was in her eyes, which were usually dark, as a dark church. . . . Her body was not flexible and living."¹⁸ The point of Paul's letter is that this kind of love

cannot support human relations. Disembodied, Christian love coerces, forces, its objects by alternately passive and aggressive means to receive it and in coercing them enervates them. Paul's rejection of Miriam parallels Lawrence's rejection of his understanding of Christian love.

There is little resonance in this letter on love of that other, Pauline letter on love, to the Corinthians, part of the New Testament canon, but the coincidence of name and theme does invite comparison, if only to test how accurately Miriam's love, as Lawrence portrays it, conforms to early Christian ideals. And of course as many critics note, the Christianity Lawrence targeted is neither biblically nor historically normative. Far from freeing the soul from the body, or exalting it to a station above the body from which it can radiate disembodied love, St. Paul weds the soul to the body so intimately, as indeed his Jewish roots would have him do, that he can only conceive final salvation in bodily terms. There is a love that is visionary, mediated by the eyes as Miriam's is, and that emanates ideally from a disembodied soul, only it is not Christian but Platonic. Paul Morel, speaking for Lawrence, has simply mislabeled the love he condemns. So Lawrence turns out to be a serious rejector of religion after all, only not of Christian religion but Platonic religion.

Lawrence's rejection of Platonism was so virulent that it could not remain bound by the limits of negation. It needed a channel of affirmation, which it found in the direction of sexual love. Lawrence's affirmation of sexual love carried all of the extremity of his rejection of Platonism. And it was really the extremity of that affirmation—sacralizing what Platonism demonized—that offended Christians. Christianity becomes the unwitting target of Lawrence's critique after all, for resting content merely to bless, but not sacralize, sexual love. And so it is through Christianity that Lawrence's rejection of Platonism is reflected back to him, by the celebrated obscenity trial against *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, and the addition of that book to what was once the Catholic Church's Index of Prohibited Books. In this way, Lawrence illustrates not only literature's critique of religion but religion's critique of literature.

THEODORE DREISER AND THE IDEAL OF BEAUTY

There is a still deeper level to the dispute between Lawrence and Platonic religion. It is not merely the anti-Platonist in Lawrence that

rejects all aspirations to transcend the body, it is also the artist in him, for it was not so much sex as creativity that was sacred to him. Nineteenth-century romanticism had already taught that the artist unconsciously mediates, more passively than actively, imaginative energies that flow naturally through him (provided nothing blocks them). Sex is Lawrence's chief trope for the unimpeded natural energy by which creative artworks arise. This does not reduce the offense that Lawrence is to Christianity, for in Christianity human creativity has no more claim to being sacred than does sex or nature. But it does position Lawrence to represent writers (and artists generally) in their claim upon a quality that the church had taught, for centuries, was exclusively God's own, namely, creativity and to represent them in a way that offers promise of rapprochement with Christianity. For part of what makes the natural creative energies animating the artist natural is that they come from beyond his will. And if the originating will is divine, then God and humanity are apportioned complementary, not conflicting, roles in the genesis of artworks. This harmonization extends beyond monotheism to Platonic religion, the original source of the breach between Lawrence and Christianity, since Plato taught that poets composed in an ecstasy of divine possession.

When we move beyond the critiques that religion and literature have separately issued of each other, which make a battleground of the space between them, to artworks themselves—to the creation, beauty, and appreciation of them—then it is striking how easily analogies to the divine—its creative activity, sublimity, and manifestability in human experience—suggest themselves. Lawrence has introduced the first analogy, between divine and human creativity. And now Theodore Dreiser serves to introduce the second, between divine and artistic beauty.

From the standpoint of the novel's dialogue with religion, Dreiser and Lawrence have so much in common that it is surprising that so few comparisons between them have been made. Both of them rejected the Christianity of their youth, suffered having books censored by the Catholic Church, and looked to nature for spiritual sustenance. Dreiser differs from Lawrence religiously by coming late in life to affirm one branch of Christianity, Quakerism. But what he affirms in Christianity mirrors what Lawrence rejects in it, namely, a projection onto it of a religious sensibility from outside it. If Lawrence's rejection of Christianity is more truthfully of Platonism, then Dreiser's affirmation of Quaker Christianity is more truthfully of pantheism.

Dreiser was raised a Catholic. Like Lawrence, he rejected institutional Christianity early on, on experiential grounds, because of the terrible poverty he observed around him, and on intellectual grounds, under the influence of such social Darwinist thinkers as Herbert Spencer. Dreiser is typically identified as a naturalist, or social realist, who narrated the tragic subjection of his characters to social forces beyond their control. But his naturalism late in life took a romantic turn, due at least partly to his sympathetic reading and editing of Henry David Thoreau. He came to believe that a Creative Force underlay the natural world, and that it revealed itself to us in the beauty and design we discerned in our environment. Another late-life discovery for Dreiser was Quakerism. This liturgically spare, governmentally flat, mystically charged expression of Christianity came as close in his eyes as religion could to pure institutionlessness without losing an organizational presence in the world. In his late novel, *The Bulwark*, these two quite different religious streams, of neotranscendentalism and Quakerism, combine to shape a theme of which the first supplies the inner content and the second the outward form. "Dreiser used Quakerism in the novel as a vehicle for expressing his own emergent exultation in the Creative Force."¹⁹ Traditional Quaker readers were not deceived. For all of its radicalism, Quakerism is still Christian in its roots, not pantheist. As one Quaker critic commented about this book, "Friends will read it with strong to violent disapproval."²⁰

One of Dreiser's inheritances from his economically impoverished childhood was a fascination with beauty. The beauty that wealth enabled represented an attractive alternative to poverty, but beauty also showed in the midst of poverty (as in the rural, Indiana landscapes of his boyhood), offering there momentary consolations. Beauty is the fascination that draws some of Dreiser's characters to their doom, but it also works, conversely, to elevate, in the character of Etta Barnes from *The Bulwark*, one of Dreiser's most attractive heroines.

From her very youngest days, Etta was a dreamer, stricken with those strange visions of beauty which sometimes hold us all spellbound, enthralled, but without understanding. In no way in which her father, her sisters, and her brothers were wise, was she wise. There is a wisdom that is related to beauty only, that concerns itself with cloud forms and the wild vines' tendrils, whose substance is not substance, but dreams only, and whose

dreams are entangled with the hopes and yearnings of all men.
Etta was such a one.²¹

Dreiser does not interrupt the poetry of this passage to elucidate the wisdom that is related to beauty only, but we may surmise that it turns on attunement to the Creative Force of nature. That Dreiser bestows this wisdom on Etta, a Quaker, makes of her a point of synthesis between the novel's conflicting undertone of pantheism and overtone of Quakerism. It is all the more to our purpose if we can trace the pantheism, as some critics do, back to so eminent a literary figure as Thoreau, for then Etta personifies the tension between literary and Christian voices over the value of beauty. It is already an irony that a Quaker, schooled to discipline natural human responsiveness to aesthetic allure, should show the wisdom of beauty. We might expect that wisdom to carry Etta out of Quakerism entirely and for awhile it does, in the form it takes of an attractive Greenwich Village artist, with whom she has an affair. At the end of the novel, Etta returns to her Quaker roots, but only at the end, so Dreiser is spared having to show how the alternative wisdoms of beauty, and of the Inner Light, can coalesce enduringly in one person. But at least he has raised the question for us, his readers, of whether they can.

L. P. HARTLEY AND THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The English novelist, L. P. Hartley (1895–1972), is probably the least well known of our six novelists. His best-known book, *The Go-Between* (1953), became a successful film (1970). Hartley is the sort of novelist a librarian would commend to the hapless lover of Hawthorne who, having read all of his novels and stories, is bereft of any more to read. Hartley himself admired Hawthorne and wrote about him. Like Hawthorne, Hartley rejected the religion of his childhood, in his case, Methodism, and though he later converted to the Church of England, he was as muted in his Anglicanism as Hawthorne was in his Congregationalism, except in one area of appreciation that he further shared with Hawthorne: a love of gothic cathedrals.

Hartley grew up near the English cathedral city of Peterborough. One biographer speculates that it was just the aesthetic lure of the

cathedral that drew Hartley into the Church of England.²² In the work considered his masterpiece, *Eustace and Hilda*, a local cathedral sets the context for an unusual religio-aesthetic experience in the life of the young hero, Eustace. As a young child, he is on an outing with his family when he looks up at the cathedral window:

Here they were, under the shadow of the church ... [whose west window the guidebook called] "an earthly echo of a symphony made in heaven." The word, "heaven," ... released Eustace's visual eye from dwelling on the material structure of the medieval mason's masterpiece. The design, with all its intricacy, faded from his sight, to be replaced in his mind's eye by the window's abstract qualities, its beauty, its vigor, its originality, its pre-eminence, its perfection. With these ... he began to feel as one. He ... floated upwards. Out shot his left arm, caught by some force that twisted this way and that; he could feel his fingers, treble-jointed and unnaturally long, scraping against the masonry of the arch as they groped for the positions assigned to them. ... Even his hair ... rose from his head and swaying like seaweed, strove to reach up to the keystone. Splayed, spread, crucified ... into a semblance of the writhing stonework, he seemed to be experiencing the ecstasy ... of petrification. Meanwhile ... pictures of saints and angels, red, blue and yellow pressed against and into him, bruising him, cutting him, spilling their colors over him. The pain was exquisite, but there was rapture in it, too. Another twitch, a final wriggle, and he felt no more; he was immobilised, turned to stone. High and lifted up, he looked down from the church wall, perfect, pre-eminent, beyond criticism.²³

This is as much a portrait of religion in aesthetic experience as of aesthetics in religious experience. Like Etta in *The Bulwark*, Eustace is a point of convergence for both religious and aesthetic sensibilities. It is a highly impressionable child who imagines himself transposed into the figures of a stained glass window. As Eustace matures, this impressionability takes on self-sacrificial hues that ally him with certain kinds of religious figures. At the same time, he develops artistic talents as a writer and becomes a novelist. But Hartley is astute enough to shade the self-sacrificial behavior with suggestions of self-destructive self-indulgence.

The first book of the trilogy constituting *Eustace and Hilda* is entitled *The Shrimp and the Anemone*. It tells the story of Eustace's childhood relation with his older sister, Hilda. In the episode for which the first book is named, the two children witness by the seashore one of nature's cruelties, a beautiful anemone in the process of devouring a shrimp. In sympathy for the shrimp, Eustace tries to extract it from the anemone's clutch but in the process beheads the shrimp and disembowels the anemone, so that both die. Critics see the episode, which comes at the very beginning of the novel, as a metaphor for the relation between Eustace and his older sister. The relation is precipitously if not actually incestuous. Eustace is the shrimp who sacrifices himself to the guidance and wishes of his sister, the beautiful but devouring anemone. But the sacrifice is ultimately not willing or whole. By the end of the novel, Eustace rebels against it and in the process accidentally nearly kills his sister and actually dies himself, in imitative repetition of the shrimp and anemone scene from the start. That this troubled and troubling fate falls to the character who, at an early age, is already weaving together elements of religious and aesthetic experience raises the question of how successfully the two can be combined. The imaginative self-sacrifice implicit in Eustace's projection of himself into the stained glass is quite different from the actual sacrifice he tries to make of himself in relation to his sister. Self-sacrifice shows differently in the aesthetic experience of art and the religious experience of life, or, at least, the novel raises the question of whether it does. Perhaps Hartley is suggesting that to work without self-destruction, self-sacrificial behavior must be religiously and not aesthetically motivated, and Eustace, tragically, has failed to distinguish the two. But Hawthorne, in one of his magnificent hedgings, may already have warned against the temptation to mix artistic with religious experience when he showed the relation between the minister, Dimmesdale, and the textile artist, Hester Prynne, come to such a sorry end.²⁴

LEO TOLSTOY AND THE RELATION OF RELIGION AND ART TO ETHICS

Perhaps there is no more dramatic example of separation between religion and literature than early nineteenth-century Russia where, it is said, the preeminent writer of the day, Alexander Pushkin, and the preeminent saint, Serafim of Sarov, did not know of each other's exist-

tence.²⁵ That separation surprises, if only because the Russian Orthodox Church seems to provide a more hospitable climate for the arts than, say, early American Puritanism. “The Orthodox liturgy has a beauty that does not escape the most secular visitors.”²⁶ At the same time, the Orthodox Church, which preserves more of the substance and mood of its ancient roots than perhaps any other form of Christianity, is not known for bold intellectualizing. Its doctrinal life effectively closed in 737, the year of the last ecumenical church council that is authoritative for it. And so when the European Enlightenment moved East, under the encouragements of Tsar Peter the Great, the church had no resources to contain it, and a new intellectual class arose outside itself. It was to this class that writers such as Pushkin, Turgenev, and Tolstoy belonged.

Tolstoy is the only one of our six authors to undergo a dramatic religious conversion, which itself received literary expression in his book *Confession*. The conversion experience marks a turn in his literary output. His two great novels, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, precede the conversion. Afterwards, much, although not all, of his work took the form of religious tracts. Critics largely agree that, with some notable exceptions, such as “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” the novels and stories that followed the conversion are less memorable than those that preceded. And this could open up another vantage point on religion’s critique of literature, or literature’s of religion, that stories that channel religious doctrine invariably sacrifice their aesthetic potential. But the form of religion into which Tolstoy converted points us down another track. He did not become normatively Russian Orthodox. Rather, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, he emphasized the ethics of Christianity, to the explicit detriment of its theology. “The will of God is most clearly expressed in the teaching of the man Jesus, whom to consider as God and pray to, I consider the greatest blasphemy.”²⁷ Moral principles such as nonviolence and pacifism constituted Tolstoy’s personal religion. That fact challenges Christianity (and Judaism) with the possibility of being supplanted by ethics. Typically, it is much more philosophers of the Kantian type who raise that challenge. But literature, in Tolstoy’s hands, does too.

The ultimate effect of Tolstoy’s challenge to religion draws it and literature together, for they face in ethics a shared threat to their respective autonomies. If Tolstoy’s aesthetic gifts were chastened by a religious conversion that proves on inspection to be more moral than

religious, then it is really ethics that reins in his literary talents. The theory of literature Tolstoy expounds in his postconversionary essay *What Is Art?* most explicitly subordinates aesthetic drives to moral ends. No literature is good that is not also morally improving. By this standard, it is not clear whether *Anna Karenina* is good literature. Certainly what stands out for most readers about this novel is the vividness, not the ethics, of the characters. Critic Wayne Booth speaks for many Tolstoy lovers when he writes, "When reading *Anna Karenina* in my late teens, I found myself detesting everyone I met outside the book; . . . nobody in my world was half as interesting as the much more vividly imagined people in Tolstoy's. At such times, relatives and friends found me unbearably, contemptuously rude and distant."²⁸ In this case, the novel has had a positively immoral effect on its reader.

Indirectly, Tolstoy himself points to a tension between the vividness of life he sought to communicate in this novel and at least one version of moral idealism. There is a minor character in *Anna Karenina* called, simply, Varenka. Orphaned as an infant and raised by an aristocrat whom she serves, Varenka first appears in the novel at a spa, where one of the main characters, Kitty Shcherbatsky, has retired with her mother to recover from an unhappy love interest. The lovelorn Kitty is fascinated by Varenka's seeming indifference to romance and her single-minded devotion to serving others. Her ministrations to the ailing guests at the spa unfailingly have a good effect. In addition, she is musically talented but without pride in her gifts. Kitty "was entranced by her art, her voice, her face, but most of all by her manner, by that fact that Varenka . . . was completely indifferent to praises."²⁹ And Kitty wonders, "What has she got that gives her this power to disregard everything and to be so serenely independent?"³⁰

Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina* between 1873 and 1877, on the cusp of his conversion. He began writing his *Confession* only two years later, in 1879. In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy never explicitly answers Kitty's question about Varenka. If he had been asked it several years later, he might have answered that what Varenka had that so ennobled her was unselfishness. Especially in light of his postconversionary story, "The Kruetzer Sonata," which reads as a moral judgment on sex, Varenka's seeming sexlessness is an outward sign of moral elevation. Varenka surely appealed to the postconversionary Tolstoy, but there are signs she did not appeal to Tolstoy at the time he created her. Here is how Varenka appears through Tolstoy's own narrative voice:

She seemed to be a person who had never been youthful. She might be 19 or she might be 30. She was . . . good-looking rather than plain. . . . But then she was not the type of person who was attractive to men. She was like a beautiful flower which, though its petals had not yet begun to drop, was already faded and without fragrance. Besides, she could not be attractive to men because she lacked what Kitty had too much of—the suppressed fire of life and consciousness of her own attractiveness.³¹

According to distinguished historian and critic Isaiah Berlin, the religio-moral beliefs of the preconversionary Tolstoy were closest to Rousseau's.³² His conversion had less to do with Christianity than with the two non-Christian options for religious veneration that opened up after the Enlightenment: nature and ethics. Tolstoy converted from nature to ethics. It was just his preconversionary faith in the natural and spontaneous that enabled him to write such vivid stories.³³ The problem with Varenka is that she is not vivid. This judgment falls on her most harshly, not by what Tolstoy says of her but by the minor role he assigns her. Even her name is attenuated. The aristocrat who raises her never formally adopts her, so she cannot go by her patron's name. Neither can she go by her biological parents' name, since that is never disclosed. As though to seal his judgment on her, Tolstoy later invests her with a love interest—she is not above romance, after all, as Kitty mistakenly imagines—that he foils.

Varenka, at least upon first appearance, models a quality that has captivated and inspired a wide range of moral idealists, from the stoic and the Kantian to the mystical and saintly, namely, disinterest. That a picture of this moral ideal occurs so unvividly in one of his most vivid novels poses the further question: How aesthetically memorable can uniformly moral characters be?

DOSTOEVSKY AND THE LITERARY PROBLEM OF SAINTLINESS

That question, transposed back into religious terms, proved more troubling to Dostoevsky than to Tolstoy, for Dostoevsky wanted to portray a saint. Can that be done in modern literature? A surprising consensus

of critical opinion is that it cannot. Of the six themes addressed in the third part of this book—love, death, evil, suffering, forgiveness, saintliness—the last raises a border between religion and literature that may prove unpassable.

Dostoevsky, like Tolstoy, was raised in the Russian Orthodox Church. As a youth, he, again like Tolstoy, rejected it, but unlike Tolstoy, he returned to it in later years. Christianity in general, Russian Orthodoxy in particular, and the heritage of the novel are all originating points for Dostoevsky's much-quoted aspiration "to portray a positively beautiful man."³⁴ For the character who bears the brunt of realizing that aspiration, Prince Myshkin of *The Idiot*, has roots in the figure of the New Testament Christ, in the Russian Orthodox institution of the "holy fool," and in that literary character who helped launch the novel on its course, Don Quixote. Myshkin, like Eustace Cherrington and Etta Barnes, mingles dual heritages from religion and literature.

The worry over saints in literature is that their sanctity deprives them of aesthetic interest. The assumption is that sanctity, like God as traditionally conceived, is simple, and so without the complexity that underlies the capacity of a character to sustain interest. But it is by no means obvious that sanctity is simple. The holiness of God as the Bible portrays it carries as much potential destructiveness as blessing. Religious experience, according to the now-classic analysis by Rudolf Otto, divides between feelings of terror and love. If the simplicity of God turns out to be, as some church traditions teach, a *coincidentia oppositorum*, then there is ample room for literary characters who imitate that simplicity to arouse and sustain interest.

Certainly Dostoevsky was fascinated by juxtaposed, if not coinciding, opposites. At several points throughout *The Idiot*, Myshkin is paired with his sinister opposite, Rogozhin. Originally in Dostoevsky's mind, Myshkin was himself to embody moral opposites, but as the novel evolved, the darker side of his nature manifested as the separate character, Rogozhin.³⁵ But Myshkin was not entirely relieved of darkness; it descended on him physically in the form of a darkening disease, epilepsy. Epilepsy itself has, in the annals of medical history, a religious side. It once was known as "the sacred disease" because the convulsions associated with it seemed religiously inspired. That is how Dostoevsky presents Myshkin's own epilepsy in this well-known passage from *The Idiot*:

He remembered among other things that he always had one minute just before the epileptic fit . . . when suddenly in the midst of sadness, spiritual darkness and oppression, there seemed a flash of light in his brain, and with extraordinary impetus all his vital forces suddenly began working at their highest tension. The sense of life, the consciousness of self were multiplied ten times at these moments which passed like a flash of lightening. His mind and his heart were flooded with extraordinary light; all his uneasiness, all his doubts, all his anxieties were relieved at once; they were all merged into a lofty calm, full of serene harmonious joy and hope. But these moments . . . were only the prelude of that final second . . . with which the fit began . . . [which plunged him into] stupefaction, spiritual darkness, idiocy.³⁶

So intimate a pairing of harmonious joy with spiritual darkness is surely ripe with dramatic potentials, which Dostoevsky exploits in the epilepsy scenes of the novel. The question is whether Myshkin's sanctity of character shows through the drama or is eclipsed by it. Myshkin himself reasons that the split second of harmonious joy weighs so much more in good than the resultant darkness does in evil that the tension between them resolves in favor of the good. The trouble is that joy and idiocy are not the only opposites between which Myshkin's sanctity hovers. Much of the plot is driven by the division of his affections between the beautiful but tragic Nastasya, whom he loves compassionately, and the beautiful but normal Aglaia, whom he loves romantically. And far from resolving that affectional rift, he himself is torn in two by it and regresses in the end to a permanent state of "stupefaction, spiritual darkness and idiocy." That regression can be read two ways—as the failure of his sanctity or the failure of a desanctified world to tolerate sanctity. If the first, then Dostoevsky has sacrificed Myshkin's sanctity to the dramatic requirements of literature; if the second, then the opposite danger looms, since the authorial voice then takes on a posture of sanctity that in a fictional world abandoned by God becomes inauthentic, becomes sanctimony. Dostoevsky is too religious a writer for the first course and too honest a writer for the second. And so, like Myshkin, he hovers between the opposites. But in so doing, he raises our last question: Can saints appear in modern literature?