Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel by Pericles Lewis

Review by Emer Nolan on politico.ie

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Many key writers among the Western intellectual and artistic elites lost their faith in God at a time when the mass of people were still believers. In his poem “Dover Beach” (1867), the English poet Matthew Arnold described the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of the “Sea of Faith”. However, as Pericles Lewis writes in this study of religious experience in the modernist novel, that “roar” would continue to sound in Western literature for a century or more. As he argues, many philosophers and authors would seek to provide replacements for religion “in the wake of a God whose announced withdrawal from this world never seemed to be quite complete”.

We are more used to considering the relationship between religion and literature in poetry than in the novel. Poets from Arnold to Philip Larkin explicitly question how people would continue to try to make sense of sexuality and death or of their experiences of the “unseen” in a post-religious age. Famously, T. S. Eliot, the most important English-language poet of the early twentieth century, despaired of secular society and eventually became a committed Christian. Lewis quotes from a 1928 letter that the novelist Virginia Woolf wrote to her sister about Eliot’s conversion:

“Then I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I mean, there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God”.

Certainly, we expect novelists like Woolf to be more committed than poets to the “real” world of men and women who struggle to confer meaning on their lives through their own thoughts and actions alone. The novel is itself a literary genre born in modernity and one which appears to be entirely concerned with the secular realm of everyday experience: indeed, the critic Georg Lukács described the novel as “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God”. Yet, as this detailed study shows, even Woolf constantly explores what she called “moments of being” in her novels: forms of sublime experience appropriate for a modern community which no longer has a single measure of the sacred. These allow for a modern experience of the transcendent and for the interconnection of minds beyond the level of ordinary language. In terms borrowed from the sociologist Max Weber, Lewis argues that such modernist experiments facilitate a “re-enchantment” of the world in an era of rationalization, bureaucracy and materialism.

It is one of the great strengths of Lewis’s lucid and erudite book that he looks not only at crucial novels written between the final decades of the nineteenth century and the Second World War,
but that he also interprets these works in the light of some of the major thinkers of the modernist age. For example, he examines Henry James in relation to the philosophical writings of his brother, William James; he then goes on to pair Marcel Proust with Émile Durkheim, who had also studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris. He twins Franz Kafka with another secularized Jew from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Sigmund Freud, and compares Woolf to Weber, also an intellectual from a Protestant background.

In his concluding chapter, Lewis considers James Joyce in the context of Dante and of accounts of death and the afterlife in classical literature. The Irish author is the only Catholic among this group of novelists and the only one to have received a strict religious education. Many of the others were themselves the children of skeptics or secularists and therefore not part of the initial nineteenth-century revolt against traditional faith. Freud was probably the most influential and the most anti-religious of the lot. Although he claimed not to experience it himself, he suggested that faith must resemble an “oceanic feeling”. But like many other intellectuals then and since, he was confident that secular reason was superior to religious insight and would eventually yield the most satisfactory explanations of the psyche and of human culture.

Of course, this “secularization thesis” is open to challenge. As well as offering wonderfully succinct and compelling accounts of the views of various social theorists on religion, Lewis explores some of the reasons why religious experience continued to matter to many artists. The mission of the artist was not so much to explain the continuing sense of a connection with a metaphysical realm, but rather to represent it. In their various ways, Kafka, Proust, Woolf, Joyce and others sought a new understanding of religious experience, and in their own masterpieces, including The Castle, Remembrance of Things Past, Mrs Dalloway and Ulysses, they recreated sacred texts in modern forms. These novelists contended against the atomization and alienation of modern life by searching within the consciousnesses of their characters for the keys to a new kind of community.

Of course, the traditional religions also held out the trump card of the promise of immortality. In A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Joyce sets himself up as a priest of the imagination, “transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life”. But while art might be a form of eternal life, Joyce also dwelt on the more mundane business of burying the dead and of what becomes of them. As Lewis puts it, Joyce’s funeral ceremonies remind the mourner “that eventually he too will be the central figure in this most inevitable of rites”.

In the “Hades” episode of Ulysses, attending a funeral in Glasnevin is at one level just another part of an ordinary day for Joyce’s hero Leopold Bloom. But Joyce shows us how such rituals feed on our desire for eternal life – or at least for the kind of immortality that comes from being talked about by those you leave behind. Lewis remarks in passing that Ireland’s “secularization” was to come much later than in many other European countries. Our first openly secular, post-1960s generation is beginning to pass away. Some of us have had the experience of attending religious funerals for individuals that we may never have considered to be people of faith. Like many of the earlier Europeans and Americans discussed in Lewis’s fascinating book, perhaps we in Ireland are now contemplating “God’s afterlife” in a supposedly post-religious world.