Church going

The so-called New Atheists may be the current darlings of the media, but even the burnt-over ground of the secular world sports a surprisingly vigorous growth of "post-Christian spirituality": the "religion question" has returned to discourses that seemed to have finished with it. Philosopher's detect limits to the empiricism of Kantian reason, while Julia Kristeva claims that without this "incredible need to believe" we could not acquire language. If the two authors considered here have it right, the art, long thought to be Helen in religion's vacant frame, turn out to be pervaded by God even through his supposed absence. Popular culture, too, is full of invocations of the transcendent. One recent bestseller out of the heartlands of French secularism, Muriel Barbery's The Elegance of the Hedgehog (2008), perfectly mirrors the spirituality of the age. This novel has two female protagonists: a middle-aged Parisian concierge who secretly savors momentary epiphanies— in Japanese art film, jasmine tea, a Dutch still life, or an instant of human connectedness; and an "infant phenomenon," an impossibly precocious twelve-year-old John Gray, morally disgusted by the human race. The story is a series of riffs on evanescent aesthetic ecstasies, and on ways of investing life and death with moral meaning for people who have no belief in personal immortality or cosmic benevolence, but who find a transforming "always within never". Virginia Woolf for the mass market.

Penelope Lewis's Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel and George Patton's Crucifixions and Resurrections of the Image concern aspects of high culture that pioneered the sensibility democratized for contemporary consumption by the likes of Muriel Barbery. Lewis's book is a masterly analysis of the transmutation of religious experience in the modernist novel. These experimental fictions from the early twentieth century have been hailed as vehicles of the secular world-view, but Lewis provides a critique of this interpretation through a sensitive dissection of iconic modernist works. George Patton interprets the visual arts through the lens of Christian theology. He, too, points to something more nuanced than a straight secularization story. Lewis had the inspired notion of lining up five canonical modernist novelists—Henry James, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce—with their contemporaries who laid the social-scientific foundations of secularization theory—William James, Emil Durkheim, Sturmrad Proust and Max Weber—underlining their common intellectual influence. Each chapter focuses on a matched pair: the James brothers, Henry and William, brought up in a Swedesbournian household in New England; the Frenchmen, Proust and his fellow Dreyfusalus, Durkheim; the twin Central European virtuosi of the unconscious, Kafka and Freud; and, more surprisingly, Woolf, the Bloomsbury aesthete, and Weitz, the prophet of the "disenchanted world of the West." Joyce, the ex-anti-Catholic Irishman, has no social-scientific alter ego, but is paired instead with the devout Dante in a final chapter that pulls the threads and liberalism, but of heightened tension and conflict over the possibility for a religious life in the modern world. Both social theory and the modernist novel were expressions of this tension rather than simply the proclamation of a world without God.

As Walter Benjamin argued, the modernist novel abounds religious narrative forms. Yet the question of religion remains inconstant. Lewis draws emblematically on Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going," to suggest nostalgia for communal ritual and to the anxious search for sacred ground. He tweaks the novel for instances not simply of church-going, but for depictions of the uncertain boundaries between sacred and profane, and experiences of sacred power or existential significance that would once have been "religious" but, for the modernist sensibility, become glimpses of ultimate meaning within ordinary life, the "secular sacred." Lewis draws a compelling parallel between the projects of the social scientists and the modernist novelists. Both groups were composed of atheists or agnostics grappling with the continuing personal and social significance of "something beyond" mundane reality. The social scientists, in attempting to confront it "objectively," generally ended up treating religion as more or less epiphenomenal. The novelists, unconstrained by positivist canons of "scientific" methodology, grasped for non-religious language in which to describe often equivocal experiences evoking the transcendent or "unknown." For both groups the issue...
RELIGION & CRITICISM


Country Life

It is peace that strikes even by the war memorial, as if the umpire on the cricket green, all dressed in white, had saved the village from the black-frocked vicar, whose dirge at Christmas and Easter heralds the epiphanies of exiting the church. Have there are no police, no ambulances, no fire engines, no tearing streets. You can see for miles into the distance, fields and trees and hedgerows, not another house in sight.

SARAH WARDLE