Church going

BERNICE MARTIN

Pericles Lewis

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THE MODERNIST NOVEL

236pp. Cambridge University Press. £50 (US $85). 978 0 521 85650 8

George Pattison

CRUCIFIXIONS AND RESURRECTIONS OF THE IMAGE

Christian reflections on art and modernity

181pp. SCM. Paperback, £19.99. 978 0 334 04341 6

The so-called New Atheists may be the current darlings of the media, but even the burnt-over ground of the secular West sports a surprisingly vigorous growth of "post-Christian spirituality": the "religion question" has returned to discourses that seemed to have finished with it. Philosophers detect limits to the empire 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 arts, long thought to be heirs to religion's vacant throne, 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 savours 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.

Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* and George Pattison'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 worldview, but Lewis provides a critique of this interpretation through a sensitive dissection of iconic modernist works. George Pattison 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, Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud and Max Weber – underlining their common intellectual influences. Each chapter focuses on a matched pair: the James brothers, Henry and William, brought up in a Swedenborgian household in New England; the Frenchmen, Proust and his fellow Dreyfusard, Durkheim; the twin Central European virtuosi of the unconscious, Kafka and Freud; and, more surprisingly, Woolf, the Bloomsbury aesthete, and Weber, the prophet of the "disenchantment of the world". Joyce, the ex- and 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 of the book together in a profound and illuminating coda on "the burial of the dead".

Lewis rightly pinpoints the 1870s as the apex of popular religious revival, with a real crisis of religious faith only biting in the early twentieth century, and then almost exclusively among the intellectual class. He gives a nuanced account of reactions to the secularizing trends in European thought, including Catholic, Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical revitalizations alongside Protestant liberalism and secularist scepticism. He summarizes as follows: "the early twentieth century was a period not of widespread agnosticism and liberalism, but of heightened tension and conflict over the possibilities 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 abandons religious narrative forms. Yet the question of religion remains insistent. Lewis draws emblematically on Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going", to suggest nostalgia for communal ritual and the wistful search for sacred ground. He trawls the novels 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 sciences 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, groped for non-religious language in which to describe often equivocal experiences evoking the transcendent or "unseen". For both groups the issue

was pivotal, and even their humanistic unbelief is inflected by the shape of their religious backgrounds. The James brothers, Woolf and Weber came from liberal Protestant provenance and moved towards religious scepticism. Proust (a baptized Catholic), Durkheim, Freud and Kafka were assimilated Jews influenced by the Jewish Enlightenment but also steeped in the Christian culture of Europe. Joyce was the most antagonistic towards religion, but notoriously proclaimed it more satisfying to disbelieve the coherent fiction of Catholicism than the incoherent one of Protestantism. Lewis points to the existential urgency of this issue for writers who suffered periodic bouts of depression: none of them was a "healthy minded" optimist, untroubled by the absence of meaning in a world without purpose, including William James who coined the term.

The richness of Lewis's book lies in its vivid and persuasive detail, and the careful cross-referencing between chapters. Each pair of theorist and novelist is used to dissect a particular aspect of the problem of religion. The chapter on the James brothers uses *The Golden Bowl* to expose the underlying paradox of the voluntaristic and individualistic model of the modern social contract underlying William's theory and Henry's narratives. It depends on free will, but requires "an effort wilfully to submit to a fiction that demands passive submission". Thus Maggie's strategic fiction about her marriage and the relations between Amerigo and Charlotte stands for the wider political dilemma: community is possible only through the sanctification of lies and hypocrisy.

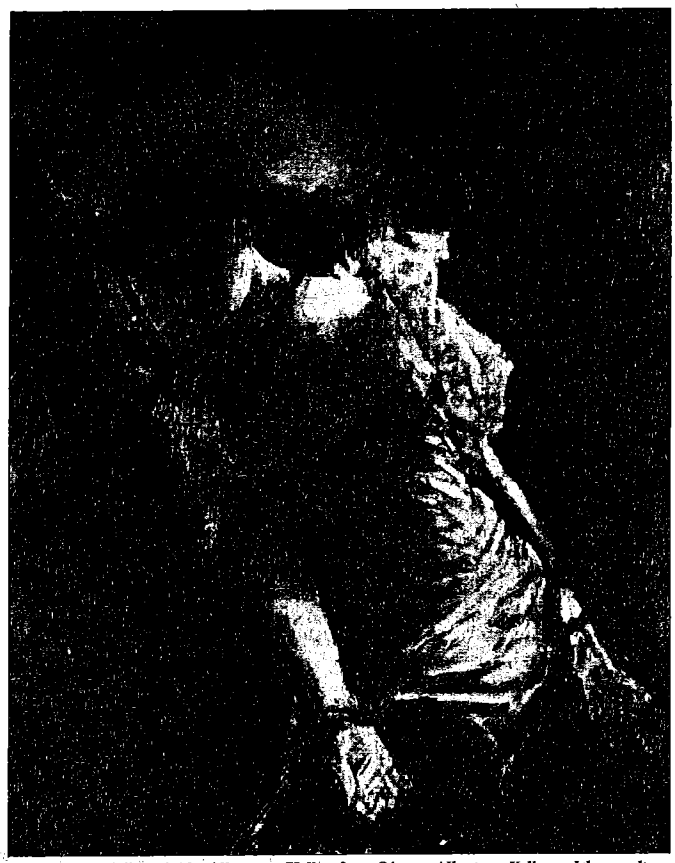
Totemism links Durkheim's theory of religion and Proust's conception of the power of magical objects to represent and resurrect a whole social world. Both writers are fascinated by the rituals through which "the social" is performed – whether in the Verdurin salon or among Australian aborigines. Yet Proust, like Virginia Woolf, is troubled by the essential isolation of the individual and the difficulty of knowing other minds. Like Henry James, he finds a sort of solution in "the magical power of desire which binds us to others and to the dead regardless of whether we would choose it so".

Kafka and Freud are melancholy practitioners of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Nothing is as it seems; reality is inscrutable. In Kafka's dream-like novels – most of the illustrations come from *The Castle* – suggestions about what events and situations might mean are offered and simultaneously undercut, while Freud's "aggressive probing of appearances" is more decisive but no more comforting about the nature of the hidden truth. Their final works, in particular, "reflect their ideas of the central forces holding together community: for Freud, violent desires and repressed memories; for Kafka, a ritualized form of daily life that becomes sacred under the name of art".

Virginia Woolf, like Weber, suspected that the universalistic monotheism of Christianity was pretty much played out, but felt she must confront the existentially inadequate materialistic values of the age and the disenchantment of the world that Weber anatomized. She devised "a kind of modern polytheism" where incompatible values continuously collided, and narrated her stories from multiple perspectives to mirror this. Authentic spiritual experiences are moments of intense or ecstatic "being" within the weave of daily life. They hint at "a revelation of some order", though ultimate meaning is never deciphered except fragmentarily, in that each individual, and especially the artist, may follow an idiosyncratic vision. Weber, too, had a hunch that art was beginning to take the place of religion as the locus of individualized modern epiphanies.

The final chapter deals with the treatment of death in Joyce's *Ulysses*, interweaving the same theme from earlier chapters. Classical and archaic myths rather than Christian narrative structures undergird many modernist fictions, most explicitly in Joyce. Images of the afterlife as a shadowy and unhappy state are used to undercut comforting Christian visions. Lewis relates this to a post-war sense of bitterness and inconsolable loss that intensified the religious crisis of the 1920s and 30s.

Yet even Joyce sympathetically represents personal pieties towards the beloved dead, and shows the sacramental acts of the priest as in some sense socially potent, even with no God to guarantee them. The fascination with memory is part of the search for an alternative immortality for the dead, in the recollections of the living and in the embalming fluid of literature. Even the strictest secularist seems not quite reconciled to mere animal cessation – anyway, not for intellectuals and artists who have an oeuvre to leave behind.



"Heilige Julia" (study) by Albert von Keller; from *Séance: Albert von Keller and the occult*, edited by Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker and Gian Casper Bott (104pp. University of Washington Press. $30; distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers. £19.99. 978 0 295 99082 8)

As a compilation of occasional pieces, George Pattison's book is less tightly argued than Lewis's. Much Christian theology of art is preoccupied with the relation between human representation and divine creation, and Pattison has written in this vein elsewhere. Here, however, though he does not attempt a systematic theology of art, he uses the dialectic in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as his theological framework, heavily inflected by an existential perspective – Pattison has published scholarly works on Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Like Lewis, he begins with the modern moment in the arts as defined by the Death of God. He sees it reflected in theorists such as Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille, and in creative writers such as Baudelaire and Dostoevsky. *The Idiot*, with its Christ-like figure destroyed by the modern world, its plot device of pictures as an assault on simple faith, and its heroine as a "fallen woman", provides a recurring interpretive trope. Following Bataille, Pattison cites Manet's "The Dead Christ with Angel" as the indicative break in pictorial art, since no representation of divine flesh had ever been so "shockingly dead" (not even Grünewald? or the innumerable gruesome Spanish crucifixions?). Manet's oeuvre stretches between it and that other lustrous fallen woman, "Olympia", thereby "confronting modernity with its own assumptions". Pattison is perhaps on less secure ground suggesting that the calm, meditative interiors of Vilhelm Hammershøi also represent the absence of God, though his case for Warhol's preoccupation with meaningless death is stronger.

Many of the artists Pattison discusses are either agnostic or in a conflicted relation to their religious background. Yet he plausibly identifies motifs such as hope out of despair, growth out of destruction, and prophetic denunciations of injustice in a wide range of works with little obvious connection either in form or content to the religious art of the past. He even makes a case for G. F. Watts's now aesthetically devalued picture "Hope", perhaps because it inspired Barack Obama.

There are chapters on Mark Rothko, Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer and Antony Gormley, and on the Central Asian artist Erkin Mergenov's sculpture of returning migrants, entitled "Pietà". The two final chapters are on film, the first on Akira Kurosawa's version of *The Idiot* and three other films, by Bergman, Tarkovsky and Lars von Trier, on the theme of God and madness/salvation; and the second on *Cinema Paradiso*. All the essays are aesthetically acute as well as theologically subtle: not all readers will accept all Pattison's interpretations, but they may want to look again, or for the first time, at the works. Like Pericles Lewis, George Pattison makes a powerful case for regarding modern art as more equivocal about its own secularity than is commonly assumed through exposing the half-hidden but still transformative resonances of the Christian, and Jewish, theological repertoires.

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 euphoria
of exiting the church.
Here there are no police,
no ambulances, no fire engines,
no teeming streets.
You can see for miles into the distance,
fields and trees and hedgerows,
not another house in sight.

SARAH WARDLE